

Table of Contents

Abstract..... 2.

Introduction..... 3-5.

Theoretical approaches..... 5-12.

On reading Ryan Murphy’s critical creation(s)..... 12-14.

An analysis of the symbolical power present within the composition of the American nuclear family
and how it is critiqued through its representation in American Horror Story: Murder
House..... 14-62.

Conclusion..... 62-64.

Works Cited..... 65-66.

Abstract

This Master's Thesis is a psychoanalytical investigation into the critical interpretation of the traditional family practice taking place within contemporary American society as it is vividly mediated out to the viewing masses of the world by Ryan Murphy in his 2011 FOX series *American Horror Story: Murder House*.

By making an individual analysis of each relevant episode with the theoretical propositions made by psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud such as that of 'the unconscious', 'the perceptive aspects of the primary and secondary processes', 'the repetition compulsion', as well as the 'final model of the mind' and the theoretical composition of 'the abject' by philosopher Julia Kristeva readily at hand, this Master's Thesis functions to bring a critique of how the American nuclear family remains an unchangeable product of its past sociological definition that places the validating notion of embodying the American (nuclear family) dream on a pedestal never to be obtainable to the desire driven psychological being of the American individual, who is indeed forever expected to pursue it, even in death. The main oppositional focus of the thesis is centered on sociologist George Peter Murdoch's 1949 definition of 'the nuclear family' and its compatibility with the society in which it is expected to manifest itself by viewing it in the contextual framework of yet another cornerstone that can be found at the baseline of American society, one that is commonly known as the American dream. Furthermore, the analyses of the various relational narratives vividly demonstrate how this traditional nuclear family structure is problematically critiqued by Murphy as being not only outdated in its implementation of the gender bias that is represented in between the various inhabitants of *Murder House*, but also overtly reliant on the cultural entity of religion and the definition of proper familial conduct that is forwarded within Christianity, making it ignorant of the basic (Freudian) psychological functions that constitute human behavior, and therefore, downright incompatible with the internal structure of any American family, past or present, ultimately documenting the message of lethal failure that is left behind in each horrifying attempt to inhabit a standard of social acceptability that was determined in 1949 and seemingly never to be revised in accordance with the nature and circumstances of the American people expected to uphold it.

Introduction

The aim of this Master's Thesis

This Master's Thesis is intended to bring a critical analysis of the interpersonal relationships portrayed within the 1st season of Ryan Murphy's ongoing FOX series American Horror Story titled "Murder House" (2011) as a cinematic depiction of the key components found in the Freudian model of psychoanalysis consisting of the structure of 'the unconscious', 'the final model of the mind', and the ongoing behavioral feature of the 'repetition compulsion' in order to fulfil the overall investigative premise of:

Providing a critical investigation into the contemporary depiction of the gender bias to be found within the cultural construction of the American nuclear family. This will be done with an emphasis placed on a set of thematic compositions. Firstly, at how marriage functions as a religious institution providing the social arena in which man battles his desire driven urges against the judgement of morality. Secondly, at the mortal desire to reach familial immortality through the biology of reproduction, and thirdly at how this conservational use of human reproduction breathes eternal life into the amoral quest for inhabiting the American dream perceived to manifest itself in the form of a traditionally functional nuclear family.

Within the online entries of The Social History of the American Family: An Encyclopedia (2014) Raúl Medina Centeno initially defines the notion of what constitutes the so called 'traditional nuclear family' in accordance with the sociological imagery that is forwarded by the U.S. Census Bureau consisting of: "a married couple living with their biological children and no one else".(2) His elaborate entry presents a thorough exploration into the historical concept of the nuclear family, and provides its reader with a decoding explanation of the thoughts and practices from which the definition came to be. One particularly interesting example consists of the introduction into the social roles and functional dynamics of the nuclear family's participants as they were outlined by anthropologist George Peter Murdock in the year 1949. According to Murdock, the nuclear family could be determined by its member's abilities to inhabit a set of functional requirements that all enabled the individuals in question to meet the standards of an ideal social performance. As it is written in Raúl Medina Centeno's entry, the nuclear family was historically seen, and ultimately defined by George Peter Murdoch as:

A universal social group, characterized by common residence, economic cooperation, and reproduction. It includes adults of both sexes, at least two of whom maintain a socially approved sexual relationship, and one or more children, own or adopted, of sexually cohabiting adults". (...) the nuclear family fulfills four basic functions: sexuality (nuclear family is the social group that controls sexual instinct), reproduction (having children in the family for survival and reproduction of the species, but also of the family per se), education (e.g., socialization of the children by looking after and loving them, but also educating them on the basic cultural skills), and economics (division of labor, both as a couple and as parents in and out of the house, that is, women at home looking after the children and men working outside the home, thus making the nuclear family a social, efficient, and exceptional economic organization).

(2)

At the end of his section on Murdoch, Centeno concludes by stating how Murdoch himself saw no other social organization more profitable to society than that of his own proposed formula of a nuclear family performing adequately in the context of its four above stated purposes. With the establishment of the practices that form the traditional nuclear family, it is highly relevant to introduce the definition of yet another social practice that can be placed in culturally praised prolongation to the former: the American dream. According to the Cambridge Dictionary, the American dream is by definition: "the belief that everyone in the US has the chance to be successful and happy if they work hard" ("the American dream"). Through my psychoanalytical work with Ryan Murphy's 2011 series American Horror Story: Murder House I wish to illustrate how George Peter Murdoch's historical definition of the traditional nuclear family is still perceived as the superior model from which to build the contemporary American family as well as how the creation of this particular form of nuclear family is perceived to ultimately lead the individual to successfully embody the very ideal of the American dream and the happiness that it promises.

The structure of the thesis

Interestingly, the series moves through time in a backwards chronology introducing the storylines that unfold under the roof of the so called Murder House from the perspective of its contemporary owners and, from there, gradually unveiling the fates of the owners that came before them. I intend to structure my analysis on that same hermeneutic principle, having my initial analysis take its form from the contemporary family of Ben, Vivian and Violet Harmon moving into the house in the year

2011 and from there regress further into the repetitive patterns of the various ghosts of families past that all vanished into the foundation of the house that was supposed to keep them together as their fates are continually revealed with the progression of each episode.

Theoretical approaches

The main toolset enlisted into the making of this thesis can be found in the genre of psychological analysis as it is presented in the theoretical conceptions made by Sigmund Freud in his work on discovering the emotional patterns of ‘the unconscious’ that resides just beneath the surface of all human beings. I will primarily be working from the theoretical outlines found in Michael Kahn’s introductory work from 2002 “Basic Freud Psychoanalytic Thought for The 21st Century” in my ongoing hermeneutic attempt to uncover how the invisible realities of the human psyche that are defined in Freudian theory are ultimately interpreted and visually reflected upon within the framework of contemporary media culture. The following paragraphs will provide an outline of the theoretical compositions that will function as the primary validation behind the claims to be made throughout the progression of the analysis.

The Freudian model of the mind’s unconscious

As I intend to have the main theoretical focus centered on the Freudian approach to the discipline of psychoanalysis throughout my analytical deconstruction of contemporary cinematography and the message that it brings on the unchanging nature of the relationship between mind and matter, it is highly relevant to initiate the utilization of the theory by viewing it as it was first presented in the context of Sigmund Freud’s source texts. I will be working from two collective Freudian reference works, firstly with the 1955 work collection titled as “The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud VOLUME XVIII (1920-1922) Beyond the Pleasure Principle and Other Works” and secondly from the preceding 1966 collection named “The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud VOLUME I (1886-1899) Pre-Psycho-Analytic Publications and Unpublished Drafts”. With the incorporation of the original materials the reader gains access to the unaltered thoughts behind the many concepts of psychoanalysis that will all be continuously reworked and retold for decades to come, as it is the case with the work of Michael Kahn that I myself will be taking into frequent use. In presenting the theoretical observations as they first came to be on the pages of Freud alongside Kahn’s contemporary retellings of them, I hope to incorporate a level of nuance to the theoretical

understanding that will function to underline the ongoing presence of Freudian psychoanalyses in our contemporary outlook on mentality and self- composition as well as the manner in which we proceed to keep the thoughts of psychoanalyses alive and accessible to the individual at any time.

First and foremost, on the subject of the human consciousness Freud provides an explanation on the dualistic mechanism that controls it. In his essay 'Beyond The Pleasure Principle' which figures in the 1955 work collection mentioned above, Freud provides an overview of the interacting factors of influence that come to compose the manner in which the human mind interacts with the external sphere of environment and how such interaction functions to effect the perception of pleasure within the individual:

What consciousness yields consists essentially of perceptions of excitations coming from the external world and of feelings of pleasure and unpleasure which can only arise from within the mental apparatus; it is therefore possible to assign to the system Pcpt.-Cs. a position in space. It must lie on the borderline between outside and inside; it must be turned towards the external world and must envelop the other psychical systems. (24).

As it has now been established how human consciousness is described by Freud to be composed of a reaction in the psyche towards internally felt emotional responses emerging from events in its external surroundings, it is necessary to have the theoretical gaze delve deeper into the construction of mankind's mind and touch upon what Freud determined to be the functional character of human instinct: "It seems, then, that an instinct is an urge inherent in organic life to restore an earlier state of things which the living entity has been obliged to abandon under the pressure of external disturbing forces; that is, it is a kind of organic elasticity, or, to put it another way, the expression of the inertia inherent in organic life". (*Beyond the Pleasure Principle* 36.) This particular explanation of what sort of interactional pattern constitutes an instinct is one that will become highly relevant to continuously have at hand when analyzing the sociological patterns that are depicted in the various fictitious representations of the institution of marriage and its compatibility with human nature as they are provided by Murphy throughout the entirety of the series narrative. The functional aspect placed behind the psychological instinct to repeat our actions, an instinct that Michael Kahn presents by the name of the so called "repetition compulsion" (97), and through that very act of repetition, ultimately come to restore and secure ourselves in the comfort of the social roles we were made to leave behind by external circumstance is perhaps the exact problematic that is being

critically illuminated in lights and lines of American Horror Story's macabre storylines all set in the framework of an attempt at marital restoration. The constitution of marriage which figures in Ryan Murphy's representation of the American dream and its culturally assigned gender identities located behind the threshold of the nuclear family coincides remarkably with the elements of Freud's instinct, and will construct the foundation of a psychoanalytical reflection on the American society and the conservative undertone of religious values engrained within it that remains as repetitive as the urge of the instinct itself.

According to Freudian thought, as it is retold in the contemporary work of Michael Kahn, how human beings act towards each other and the situational aspects of their surroundings cannot simply be boiled down to a question of an automatic response to what is right and wrong, but rather poses itself as a question of internal balance between the different levels of the psyche that in combination function to make up the mind as a completed structure. There is more to our actions than the active process of making a choice, in fact, as Freud came to advocate, there is an entire chain of hidden events that lead us firmly by the hand in any taken action:

Freud realized there was no way to explain the thoughts and actions of his patients without radically altering that view of the mind as a whole (...) He saw that consciousness was only a small part of mental life, and conceived an image to describe the mind. He portrayed the unconscious as a large entrance hall filled with mental images, all trying to get into a small drawing room into which the entrance hall opens. In that drawing room resides consciousness, with whom the impulses are hoping for an audience. In the doorway between the entrance hall and the drawing room stands a watchman, whose job is examine each impulse seeking admission and decide if that impulse is acceptable. If it is not, the watchman turns it away, and it must remain in the entrance hall of unconsciousness (Kahn 18).

As stated in the quotation above, the 'unconscious' feature of the human psyche was first outlined by Freud as something resembling the figure of a house, a metaphor that corresponds rather fittingly with the overall symbolic frame at the base of this thesis. There is, as Freud states, a selective system in place behind every human decision. The drawing room of 'consciousness' is not readily accessible to the nature of spontaneous impulses, and those who make it into the acknowledgement of consciousness have been carefully evaluated beforehand by a scaling force weighing the pros and cons of the action lurking behind the impulse in question. As the main premise of the thesis is that of

placing the behaviors of the shown individuals in relation the behavioral ideals prescribed by the society surrounding them, it seems highly relevant to have the focus centered on the way in which each pairing is portrayed to inhabit their inner watchman with varying degrees of success.

The opposing forces of the mind's principles

Broadening his notion of the mind as a unit in constant motion while held in place by a superior control system, Freud also made a blueprint for what he came to describe as the 'laws' or 'processes' of the way in which the human mind perceives the conditions of reality. These processes allegedly come in two formats, as 'primary' and 'secondary'. The primary process has no grasp on the aspect of consequences that is prominent in reality. The thought of what might happen in the aftermath of a decision is non occurring, in fact, there seems to be no sense of continuity present from action to action whatsoever. The action of thought in the primary process is short and solely centered on the desired outcome, anything that could come to unfold in the space between wanting and getting is nothing but a blur. As Michael Kahn presents it:

primary process operates without regard for *reality* (...) In this realm there is no concept of mutual contradiction or mutual exclusion. I might want to kill my father and have him take me to the movies tomorrow. I expect you to love me after I've insulted you. The laws of reality and logic being so loose, strange associations can exist: An idea can stand for a similar one; one idea can be displaced onto a totally different one; one idea can stand for a whole group of ideas. (21).

I find this description of an internal force of unreasonable reason to be rather crucial to incorporate into the relationships that play out underneath the Murder House roof and the reproductive symbolism that accompanies them. There is no logic to be found behind the already strained Harmon family's impulsive move to Los Angeles that ignites the entire narrative of the series, other than the eager pleading from the man whose selfish actions tore it apart in the first place. In his mind, Ben Harmon will be able to undo his affair by uprooting his family from the apartment in which he had it. Having a new child will erase the sorrow left behind by the child that they lost, and keeping silent will prevent his continuous visits with his pregnant mistress from really mattering. A reflection on an ongoing critical exchange between the forces of mind and matter that will be explored in further detail within the descriptive sections of the analysis along with the following opposing element of the secondary process. Standing in stark contrast to the primary process Freud

defined that of the 'secondary'. The secondary process differs notably from the primary in that it has its core function rooted in the logistical narrative of reality. There is no skipping ahead to the most convenient scenario, and there is no outlook that moves beyond that which is prescribed by common sense. In the words of Michael Kahn: "secondary process describes the familiar world of logic. Events occur in an orderly sequence. What's past is past and what's future has not yet come" (21). As it is the case with the opposing theoretical aspect of the primary process, there is a useful parallel to be drawn between the structure of the secondary process consistently abiding to logic and the theme of human ability to recognize oneself in the realm of that which is not necessarily visible to the naked eye. As the series pays an extensive thematic tribute to the supernatural, and the way in which the inhabitants of the house can be seen to interact with such phenomenon's, the series is perhaps seeking to present further critique of human inability to acknowledge that which moves away from the comfortable. All couples trapped in the framework of Murder House exemplify a continuous habit of refusing to acknowledge the structures of the principles at the time in which they were meant to be seen. Whether it is the consequences of an affair as seen in the Harmon family, or the economic failure as it is the case with the same sex couple before them, all were determined not to see the grotesque character of the reality that their home held beneath the floorboards, at least, not until the time to act had long passed.

The three part structure of the mind's Freudian agencies and the opposed functions of the conscious self found in Julia Kristeva's abject

Another theoretical aspect to be included in the toolset enlisted into the work of high level analytical deconstruction, I wish to incorporate that which was ultimately labeled by Freud as his 'final model of the mind'. In his book, Michael Kahn writes as follows:

It eventually became clear to Freud that although this was a good way to think of repression and the relationship of consciousness to the unconscious, a complete theory of the mind required a different model. He had always seen the human mind as being in persistent, unremitting conflict, and it seemed to him that this clinical data could be handled best by a picture of the mind divided not into the original three systems but into three agencies, often struggling with each other. In his final model one of those agencies operated under the laws of primary process and the pleasure principle, and another under the laws of secondary process and the reality principle. In his final picture the three agencies in the mind are the *id*, the *ego*, and the *superego*. The *id* is

the repository of the instinctual drives, sexual and aggressive. It is totally unconscious and totally unsocialized. It always operates on the pleasure principle, demanding satisfaction of the drives completely and without delay. It does not care for consequences, reason, or good sense, nor does it care about the well-being of others. The superego is our conscience. It represents our having taken into our own mind the standards and prohibitions of our parents and of society (...) Once we have taken those standards and prohibitions into ourselves we have to be aware of a new set of consequences: the attack on us by the superego, which is to say, *guilt*. Part of the superego is conscious; we know a lot about what our conscience permits and forbids. However, a large part of it is unconscious, giving rise to one of our most difficult and destructive problems: unconscious guilt. The ego is the executive function. It is given the thankless task of mediating among the id, the superego, and the outside world (...) In contradistinction to the id, it is concerned with consequences and does its best to delay gratification to avoid trouble or to gain a greater gratification later. As Freud put it, "The ego stands for reason and good sense while the id stands for untamed passions. (25-27).

With this 'final' model of the human psyche as a revised structure of intertwined agencies and principles readily applicable, I intend to engage in the act of chronologically establishing an analysis that examines the coherence between the discipline of Freudian psychology as it can be seen in relation to the traditional practices constituted in the American society that it is meant to perceive, as well as the manner in which this relationship is captured and reworked in the machinery of contemporary media entertainment in order to convey what I assume to be an overall critical reflection on each of the psychological and socio-cultural components that altogether come to form the easily influenced perceptive conduct of human behavior. I furthermore, will be working with Freud's determinations of the opposing instinctual drives of life and death in order to fully compliment the aspect of truth shown by Murphy with his choice of cinematic tone in his telling of an American horror story as a tale of mortality and marriage in which the individuals are experiencing their happily ever after in a state of total unrest. In 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle' Freud outlines the basic disconnection to be found in the progression of human life. We are all destined to die, and this destiny is one that our instincts both gravitate towards and distance us from. There is, as Freud notes, a constant opposition to be located in between the human instincts, and that opposition is one that will never come to rest in peace:

The implications in regards to the great group of instincts which, as we believe, lie behind the phenomena of life in organisms must appear no less bewildering. The hypothesis of self-preservative instincts, such as we attribute to all living beings, stands in marked opposition to the idea that instinctual life as a whole serves to bring about death. Seen in this light, the theoretical importance of the instincts of self-preservation, of self-assertion and of mastery greatly diminishes. They are component instincts whose function it is to assure that the organism shall follow its own path to death, and to ward off any possible ways to of returning to inorganic existence other than those which are immanent in the organism itself. We have no longer to reckon with the organism's puzzling determination (so hard to fit into any context) to maintain its own existence in the face of every obstacle. What we are left with is the fact that the guardians of life, too, were originally the myrmidons of death. Hence arises the paradoxical situation that the living organism struggles most energetically against events (dangers, in fact) which might help it to attain its life's aim rapidly- by a kind of short-circuit. (Freud 39).

Continuing the thematic spectrum of messaging morbidity, I lastly wish to include Julia Kristeva's theoretical concept of 'the abject' as it presented by Noëlle McAfee in the 2004 book "Routledge Critical Thinkers Julia Kristeva" as a theoretical entity to help further layer the deconstruction of the story beneath the horror story. Kristeva's ideas on how human beings are wired to interact with the self in an action of constant motion moving with gruesome grace between repulsion and attraction with the result of resurfacing memories that the mind had otherwise stored in faraway corners of the conscious is one that is greatly applicable when overlooking Ryan Murphy's cinematic showcasing of how the normatively adapted selfhood of the nuclear family remains in an ongoing battle with the selves of the individuals that constitute it:

The abject is what one spits out, rejects, almost violently excludes from oneself: Sour milk, excrement, even a mother's engulfing embrace. What is abjected is radically excluded but never banished altogether. It hovers at the periphery of one's existence, constantly challenging one's own tenuous borders of selfhood. What makes something abject and not simply repressed is that it does not entirely disappear from consciousness. It remains as both an unconscious and a conscious threat to one's own clean and proper self. (...) The abject continually violates one's own borders; it is

sickening yet irresistible. “imaginary uncanniness and real threat, it beckons to us and ends up engulfing us”. (...) Freud argued that “the uncanny is something which is secretly familiar, which has undergone repression and then returned from it” (ibid.:245). He calls this phenomenon “the return of the repressed”; Kristeva calls it “maternal abjection.” But both would certainly agree that this state is a constant companion of consciousness, a longing to fall back into the maternal *chora* as well as a deep anxiety over the possibility of losing one’s subjectivity. (McAfee 46, 47, 49).

On reading Ryan Murphy’s critical creation(s)

As the main intention of this thesis is to recapture and deconstruct the societal self-reflection that Ryan Murphy is presumably projecting onto the viewing audiences of American Horror Story: Murder House, it is rather relevant to have an understanding of the thematic tone that runs through the collective majority of his highly popular cinematic material.

First and foremost on the subject of the thesis itself, Murphy made his intentions clear from the beginning. In a 2011 interview with Christina Radish from the online pop cultural forum ‘collider.com’ he presented his then new series as something that was to take a well-known genre, that of horror, and have it appeal to a very specific, and perhaps slightly unconventional audience: women. In the article, when questioned about his approach to making a series based on horror and the elements that such a creation entails Ryan Murphy is quoted saying: “With a lot of them when you put them through a prism of sexuality and emotionality, they become more interesting. I love horror movies, but I don’t like bloody horror movies, so there is not a lot of blood in this thing. (...) I always felt that it’s interesting to write a horror show for women, not that that’s the only people that it will appeal to.” (Radish).

This statement provides a defining insight into the nature of the narrative that the following analysis will divide into pieces of correlating communication that stretches itself from Murphy’s mind to the eyes of the viewer. There is more to telling a horror story than producing a hard hitting image of something that is immediately terrifying. Aside from being construction intended to mediate a message with an appeal that is overtly founded in the sense of psychological emotion rather than the emotion of a reaction to the macabre manifestations that are usually attributed to the genre, Murphy also comments on the relationship between the horrors that unfold in the house and the reality that these fictional instances of terror are intended to reflect. In the interview Murphy provides the

following explanation with which the viewer is to experience the story: “It is a house of horrors, but the show also examines other horrors in society, not just the horrors that happens in the house” (Radish). As it is here stated by creator himself there is a direct line drawn between the ongoing actions of the house and the influence from the surrounding American society that seeps in through the cracks of its building blocks. Horror, as Murphy explains in the inserted quotations above, is as much a recreation of basic human emotion as it is a dramatic depiction of the feared and unfamiliar figures of the supernatural, a potent point of reflective foreshadowing’s that will be thoroughly touched upon in the analysis to follow below.

Continuing on with the subject of writing for women whilst having a steady finger placed determinedly at the pulse of popular culture and its conformity to the normative institutions of society, there is more to be said for the female voices of the past as they are made by Murphy to echo in the present. In his 2017 series ‘Feud’ Murphy takes on the relationship between men and women as it played out in a time where gender bias could be seen to grandly tower behind the glorified images of movie posters. Feud, despite not dealing with instances of the supernatural, bears a striking resemblance to the gender depictions made throughout the narratives made 6 years earlier in Murder House that all provide the basis for my analytical work. In a 2017 interview with Tyler Confoy from ‘esquire.com’ Ryan Murphy voices his continued effort to write about women with the intention of surfacing a self-reflective reflex within the American population. His purpose for the series is vividly apparent as he states:

With Feud, the first season is about the making of Whatever Happened to Baby Jane? and Joan Crawford versus Bette Davis. On paper, you hear that and you think, “Oh hilarious: two old broads slugging it out. It’s going to be camp, it’s going to be funny, it’s going to be hilariously comic.” Actually, the show that I wanted to set up is not comic. It’s tragic and sad, and it examines the issues of sexism, the glass ceiling, the different pay scale, how men pit women against each other, how women let them do that, and how there’s really only room in our culture for one successful at a time in an individual field. (Confoy).

Furthermore, Murphy also functions to continue the fluctuating timeframe(s) between past and present as well as fiction and reality. On the relationship between the 2016 presidential election and the possibility of a creative criticism thereof, he is quoted in the interview saying:

Interestingly enough, as we were writing the show, everybody thought that Hillary Clinton was going to be the next president. So we thought, “Ok, this show is going to come out and it’s going to be irony because we’ve gotten through all of this”. And then, of course, Trump won. So the show, I think, has an even deeper meaning because it shows, like, “Yeah, no we haven’t.” And more than that, nothing has changed for women since 1962, when this movie was made. There’s really been very little progress. (Confoy).

Where the narrative of *Murder House* has the female protagonist provide an image intended to critique the traditional institution of the American nuclear family, as it will be argued in the analysis, the narrative portrayal of women in *Feud* remains just as critical of a patriarchal society that is seemingly as immortal as the ghosts that were introduced in the previous horror story.

A contemporary critique of the American nuclear family as represented in *American Horror Story: Murder House*

Ep. 1: Pilot

In the following section I wish to initiate the overall analysis on Ryan Murphy’s critical illustration of the traditional American nuclear family as a permanent pillar of value irremovably placed, despite its incompatibility, right in the center of an ever changing nation as it is vividly introduced to the viewer through the correlating themes of marriage, family, fidelity, and the religious functionality that is seemingly societally bestowed upon the act of reproduction. Through the utilization of both Sigmund Freud’s explanation on the psychological functions of ‘reproductive immortality’, ‘repression’ and Julia Kristeva’s theoretical notion of resurfacing the unforgotten traumas of ‘abjectivity’, I will seek to deconstruct the manner in which the basic reproductive principal of human survival is shown to be both perceived and incorporated into the contemporary framework of American society in accordance with the cultural cornerstone of the nuclear family norm.

The caption on the screen lets you know where you are, placed in the framework of 2011, which at the time of the series pilot is the space of “Today” (4:56-5:57). The setting is that of a doctor’s office, a fact that is clearly established by the opening image consisting of perfectly aligned tongs and tools that are all lit up in the characteristic sheen of florescent lighting. Moving further into the scenery, you see the glowed hand of the doctor using them. The patient on whom this utilization

falls is Vivian Harmon, a woman trying to assemble herself in the aftermath of an involuntary late term abortion. Her doctor is indeed willing to hurry that process along, eagerly offering to prescribe a concoction of hormones that will function to reset and refresh her body's reproductive machinery, stating: "Your body is like a house, you can fix the tiles and the kitchen, but if the foundation is decaying, well, you're wasting your time." As it is described in the original translation of Freud's 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle' there is a division to be made between the figure of the body and the biological functions that enabled it to transcend its physical mortality. As it is defined by Freud: "The mortal part is the body in the narrower sense- the 'soma'- which alone is subject to natural death. The germ- cells, on the other hand, are potentially immortal, in so far as they are able, under certain favorable conditions, to develop into a new individual, or, in other words, to surround themselves with a new soma. (Weismann, 1884)." (45-46). Death, as Freud displays it in the quotation above, is a given in life, but with the creation of a new life from that same mortal body, or in the words of Ryan Murphy's cinematic illustration, that same foundation, there can be seen the potential for a brand new opportunity. Hesitantly, Vivian responds to the offer with a reasoning that will later echo in the greater scheme of reproductive symbolism that runs through the series from beginning to end, an answer that seems at once both humorous as well as bearing of unsettling undertones that foreshadow the uncanny revelation to be found in the later exposure of human nature and its wants and needs for a purposeful self-preservation. "I'm not a house". Vivian Harmon is right, she is a human being, not a manufacturer producing new life as way of producing a purpose to her existence, however, what she does not know is the fact that her doctor in his colloquial comparison between the human reproductive system and the basic stabilizing plumbing of a (decaying) house has introduced the very core element that dwells at the heart of the discursive composition of American Horror Story: Murder House.

We are first introduced to the Harmon family's inner dynamic whilst speeding down the lane of a highway. (8.00-13.44) In the minutes unfolding before the car ride, we saw the how Ben and Vivian's marriage came to a crashing halt as Vivian found her husband attending to his sexual urges in the arms of another woman, whilst she herself had been busy attending to the restoration of her traumatized body. The dialogue of the car is that of a typical nuclear family with two parents enthusiastically discussing the scenery surrounding the trip in the front seat, and a teenager critically objecting to all of it placed in the backseat. As they all talk in the way of a normal family free of hurt and heartbreak, Ben takes his wife's hand in a gesture of affection, only to have her retrieve it the minute his fingers intertwine with hers. The location then moves to the outside of

Murder House, a nickname for the building that will not at this time be disclosed to the couple. As the doorbell rings Ben Harmon looks around the property that will, to his greatest of hopes, come to mend the emotional ruin of his family. The solution to his failures is seemingly towering grandly in front of him and as he puts his arms around the shoulders of his estranged wife and emotionally detached daughter he happily exclaims: "Isn't this place amazing?" Walking around the dark and distinct interior of the house, the real estate broker does her best to underline the amount of heart and soul that rests in the walls of each room, she even goes as far as presenting it as a construction to be as well-loved as a family member: "The previous owners really loved this place like a child, they restored everything". While Ben and Vivian are fully engaged in discussing the main selling points of the property, their tiny white poodle is made to run free on the floor. The second its paws touch the ground it runs to bark at the entrance to the basement, the place where all the skeletons of the house, physical and otherwise, are buried. The couple is indeed made aware of the fact that the previous owners lost their lives in that very basement, but with the cut that these circumstances make to the overall price tag, who could refuse? The foundation might be in decay, but no one will even notice the smell of rot with a coat of fresh paint and a promise of total fidelity from a faulty husband to his distrusting wife. As they settle into the bedroom of their new home, Vivian can't help but feel a response to the monstrosities that have played out beneath her feet. People died in her basement, and she is honoring that by putting up pictures and dividing kitchen utensils. Ben, who is steered by the compass of his own goals of complete marital preservation, has a different outlook entirely. Ben: "Moving here, buying this house, was the exact right thing to do for us and our family. It's a good thing" As he says this, he lets his desire for regaining what he lost, that including George Peter Murdoch's traditionally justifying factor of a "socially approved sexual relationship"(Centeno, 2), take full control. He reaches for his wife, tenderly touching her arms and hands, in an attempt free their lost intimacy from the restraints of his past behavior. However, the touch of her wedding ring merely makes Vivian flinch and she quickly backs away from the massive fixture of the couple's marital bed. She turns towards her husband who is sat on his side of the neatly made up king size, facing away from her in response to the, once again, immediate rejection of his touch. As she lays her hand on the doorframe to her downstairs getaway of the kitchen, her feet remain in the space of their bedroom. She knows that her husband wants to repair and (re)press repeat on their marriage and she acknowledges his efforts: "I appreciate that you're trying. I'm trying too. It's gonna take some time." The foundation of the Harmon couple's marriage, as we are introduced to it, is decaying, and, much like the description given by Vivian's

doctor, there is no easy fix. But there is seemingly still something that will give the illusion of a clean slate, and that is the coming of a brand new life. A mean for reconciliation that is just what the doctor recommended.

(33:57-38:41) At the end of yet another failed attempt to gain intimacy with his wife, Ben loses the last strain of control left in him and gives way for a rage filled fit in which all of the emotion that has been build up in the time stretching from his affair to the present day. Flinging the tools with which his wife intends to improve the decorative interior of the house against those very walls, he heatedly yells at the woman he has been trying so determinedly to keep within their marital union with his gentle pleas for forgiveness. Ben: "How long, Viv? How long are you going to punish me for?" Vivian: "I'm not punishing you, you narcissistic asshole. I'm trying to figure out how to forgive you for having sex with one of your students. You want me to have sex with you? I can't even look at your face, Ben, without seeing the expression on it while you were pile driving her in our bed" Ben: "I screwed UP, how many times do I have to say it, I'm SORRY. I was hurting too." Vivian: "Oh, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, did the life that was growing inside you die? And did you have to carry that around in your belly? The dead corpse of our baby son? Did you have to go into labor and deliver our child? Dead!" Ben: "My son died too, my baby died too!" Vivian: "And you buried your sorrow in some 21 year old's pussy!" Ben: "You know, I can show you statistics on how many men cheat after a miscarriage, I was there for you, Viv! I was patient and understanding, and caring, and I put your feelings first." Vivian: "My hero!" (...) Ben: "You got a dog! I needed you, and you got a dog! It was me you should have been cuddling up with at night, not a dog! I needed you!" Vivian: "Oh, you needed me, so she was revenge, because you needed me, because I wasn't there for you in your time of NEED! Now I get it!" Ben: "We haven't had sex for almost a year." Vivian: "Yeah, you think I don't know that?" (...) Ben: "I love you, I moved across country for you, because in all my life, the only thing I've been truly scared of is losing you, losing this family. Something horrible happened to us, and we handled it even more horribly. But this, this place, is our second chance, Viv. It's our second chance! But I just, I just need to know that you want it too". This scene provides a verbally vivid exemplification of what could be recognized in the mirror of Kristeva's abject and the effect that it has on the way in which we come to define, or perhaps rather organize the building emotional blocks of our 'self'. As it has been described in the theoretical section above, the abject is something that will never truly fade away from memory. It is something that seems dangerous to the self and at the same time it gives way for an almost enticing feeling of allure. The abject, as Kristeva envisioned it, is an undeniable, perhaps downright

unescapable phenomenon. As stated by Noëlle McAfee: “The abject continually violates one’s own borders; it is sickening yet irresistible. “imaginary uncanniness and real threat, it beckons to us and ends up engulfing us”. (ibid.)”(47). In other words, the more we fear it, whatever form it may take, the more we want it. The abject reality of Vivian’s gory late term abortion, one that has previously been noted upon in the proper confines of a doctor’s office, but never fully commented on inside the societally glorified walls of a family home, is now returning from the place where it has been carefully stored away up until that point. Not only is the loss of life mentioned in totality, but the physical details of it are given in manner that leaves nothing to the imagination. The dead corpse of their baby son will forever be a part of their lives, and a characteristic of their selves, both as a couple and as individuals, no matter how much they do not mention it. As evidenced by the scene there is an amount of freedom provided to the individual who strips themselves of the reigns of societal restriction and lets the abject take center stage. In the moments following the outrage, their anger turns into passion and Ben and Vivian Harmon regain the socially accepted, and even more so expected (as stated by Murdoch) sexual intimacy that the abortion and infidelity took from them in the aftermath. The haunting amount of hurt that is left behind by child loss figures nowhere in the sociological formulas on ideal family life, but in the space of Murder House, it makes way for an unrestrained reconciliation between two people who are high on the rush of releasing a rage that can never be fully repressed and will ultimately end up placing them right back inside the same destructive pattern of repression, desire and abjection that they came to the city of angels to escape. In the wake of the reproductive release of the abject, the supernatural components of Murder House start to awaken from their shelter in the basement. (41:12-43:04) As Vivian is engaging in what she thinks is a second act of sexual reconnection with her husband, Ben is standing naked in the kitchen, seemingly entranced in a state of uncontrolled senseless behavior. While his wife is unknowingly being unfaithful to her husband in the upstairs bedroom with someone, or, more precisely, something disguised in a rubber suit that belonged to the previous owners of the house, he is turning on the stove and calmly reaching for the scorching flame like a moth drawn to a stream of light, as if it will bring him a pain that he needs. As his palms are about to touch the hellishly hot surface, he is abruptly stopped by his next door neighbor who is inexplicably present at the scene, gently urging him to return to his marital bed. This scene reflects what Freud labeled as ‘repression’. Repression as a psychological function keeps the individual unaware of his or her emotional distress and stores such experiences far away from the conscious as a safety mechanism. The reasoning behind it is explained by Michael Kahn to be the active choice of what seems to be

the superior alternative: “For some of us it is hard to accept our angry feelings toward anyone. As with erotic feelings, it seems better not to be aware.” (124). As it can be seen in the fictitious scenario, repression keeps the person (who’s ego is maintaining the active repression) unaware and unaffected in a situation of danger, but with that same state of unawareness comes an element of helplessness. Standing naked in the kitchen, Ben Harmon is playing with symbolical fire. Although he does indeed wish to reprise his role of the devoted family father, he is unconsciously aware of the true desire driven nature that manifests within him, the same nature that is ultimately represented to be the true nature of the house that he found so alluring. Repression is here shown to demonstrate the egocentric characteristic of the human mind. It is seemingly better to be selfish than sorry. Ben Harmon remains in a repressive trance so as not to face his sexual instincts that want to break free from the restraint of his marriage and the guilt that the admission to those instincts will inevitably bring. As he reenters the room in which his wife has just finished having intercourse with someone who was definitely not her husband, a fact that has slowly begun to dawn on her, she quietly utters the three words that magically mend every crack in the mirror of a marital reflection: “I love you”. The gesture is reciprocated by Ben, who is still held deeply in his trance: “I love you too”. Both Ben and Vivian are at this early stage of their storyline seeing the cracks of their faulty marriage widen and brighten as they both reach for the destructive stovetop, figuratively and quite literally, however, there is no skill more perfected in the frame of traditionalist American society than that of turning a blind eye to an inconveniently unconventional truth, and that is exactly what the Harmon’s will try to do. Infidelity as a thematic element is here represented as an act that will undeniably repeat itself as a mere reflex of human nature whether the individual is aware of it or not. There is no escaping the overpowering presence of the Freudian id and the desires that it encompasses, no matter how quickly one moves from the rubbles of a broken home into the shining stature of a brand new one. At the final minutes of the pilot, the Harmon’s are given the second chance that they have so desperately been looking for. Vivian is pregnant, and with that news comes the filler that can mend even the deepest rift in their fragile family figure. This new life will bring a neutral starting point to the Harmon’s remodeling of the contemporary nuclear family, or so it seems. As Ben Harmon joyously embraces his wife who less than 24 hours earlier wouldn’t let him near her, he looks beyond her shoulder and into the distance of something unknown. What he sees there is not yet visible to the viewer, but his eyes show signs of something that is nowhere near as harmonious as the moment surrounding him.

Ep. 2: Home Invasion

This section will build on the previous thematic deconstruction of what elements constitute the traditional American family (almost all of George Peter Murdoch's criteria's were met by the Harmon family's example in the final minutes of the pilot) as well as the manner in which the theme of reproduction is shown as a man possessing the abilities to, at once, both secure the survival of even the most fragile figure of a family, as well as to destroy it with the same amount of efficiency. In this episode the creation of a traditional nuclear family is depicted through the theme of infidelity and its aftermath as it is portrayed by the contemporary protagonist Ben Harmon and his interaction with the moral voicings of the society surrounding him. At this point in the narrative Murphy introduces the viewer to one of the main characteristics in his overall critical depiction of a society that praises itself as a (family) home for the brave by starting to depict the getaway function of the double standard. This criticism is one that can, and will, be perfectly underlined by further incorporation of Freud's account of 'the repetition compulsion' as well as his separation of the mind into a two-part system of opposing 'primary' (drive) and 'secondary (logic) processes' as it draws attention to the fact that the former will come to dominate the latter when the mind is faced with the task of repressing the amoral nature of the sexual urges in order to apiece the moral values of a traditional society with religion placed as one of its heaviest cornerstones.

We once again meet Ben Harmon as he is sat in the practice of his home office. He is a modern man, and he works from his home. From it, in a professional sense, not on it in terms of the emotional rehabilitation that he strongly advocated when they bought the house. Maintenance of the floors and fancy porcelain is what the maid is for. What Vivian does for a living is undisclosed at this moment, but then again she is pregnant, and that is more than enough function for her to be given in the context of a nuclear marriage, however contemporary it may be. His phone keeps buzzing, and the incoming call is swiftly ignored by Harmon, that is, until the end of his work session. (7:15-7:30) As he picks up his voice is filled with immediate irritation: "I thought we had an agreement. Do I have to get this number changed?" At the other end of the line, we hear an unknown female voice give an answer that immediately strips the joy from the blissful reproductive situation that the previous episode established with the reuniting of the troubled Harmon's through the prospect of a brand new baby. The voice at the other end of the line belongs to Hayden, Ben's former mistress, and the news that she brings is one that is loaded with the power to undo all of the reproductive reparation that have only just started to take effect: "I'm pregnant". It is at this moment that the full-fledged figure of the double standard is introduced into the marital narrative of American Horror Story as it demonstrates the function of reproduction as a repetitive compulsion

aimed at obtaining the dream of nuclear normativity. While Vivian's pregnancy might have rung in the illusion of marital reconciliation and brought the possibility of a new start, the pregnancy of Hayden irrevocably presses the reset button on Ben Harmon's quest to reset the dynamic of his family as it can be seen in the notably different dialogue on the subject taking place between him and his wife in the following transcription. (12:27-12:55) Vivian: "I haven't thrown up, Ben. When I was pregnant with Violet I was sick all the time for two months straight. There is something wrong with this baby, I can feel it." Ben: "I'd be worried if you didn't think something was wrong after what you went through with your last pregnancy. Your anxiety levels must be through the roof!" Vivian: "Don't shrink me!" Ben: "You know what I feel? This baby is why we moved here. It's our salvation, Viv".

The parallel between the two pregnancies documents the manner in which reproduction comes with an inherent function for catering to a societally self-serving purpose for the individual. There is a significant difference between the receptions of each pregnancy from the father to be in the context of this horror story. Vivian's pregnancy is nothing less than an opportunity for a downright divine salvation; Hayden's pregnancy is a cause for pure anxious agony. Ben Harmon's emotional connotations to pregnancy are shown to be utilized as means with which to bring about a state of redemptive relatability securing the survival of even the most destructive relationships, such as it is the case with his marriage. In the terms of Freudian psychoanalysis the depiction of Ben Harmon's reproductive predicament presents a demonstration of that which is known as the repetition compulsion, a theoretical concept that will continue to manifest in between the various characters. As it is explained by Michael Kahn in his introductory work, the compulsion to repeat can be described as a reoccurring wish to reach back and redo the outcome of a previous situation of pain, only to have the individual unconsciously discover the almost pleasurable drive that that same pain functioned to provide, and ultimately proceed to revive it:

At first glance it looks as though the person were trying over and over to create a happy ending for that earlier situation. But as we have seen, it doesn't work that way. Should a replay turn out happily, the experience seems spoiled, and it's back to the drawing board to re-create the old unhappy situation once again. It is as though the very painfulness of the original situation was fixating, driving one repeatedly to behave as though he or she were unconsciously trying to understand what had happened and why it had happened. The situation with a happy ending would cease to

be the *original* situation, which is defined by conflict, frustration, and guilt, and thus would lose its attraction. (97).

For Ben and Vivian Harmon reproduction is the exact repetitive compulsion intended to turn back the clock on the fate of their family, and just as it is stated on Michael Kahn's pages, it will not successfully bring back the time before the abortion, but will provide a painful repetitive pattern that neither of them are actively searching to have disappear. As it will continuously become clear in the progression of the analysis deconstructing the contemporary narrative of the Harmon family, nothing will be altered in their attempt to embrace their second chance. Ben will still favor secrecy to disclosing his extramarital mishaps, and Vivian will knowingly continue to stay in a state of distrust towards her spouse despite having the freedom to leave at any given time. As it has been touched on in the theoretical section above, Freud outlined two respective processes to accompany the states of human consciousness. The conscious aspect of the mind was to act from the reasoning perspective of the secondary process that acknowledges "the familiar world of logic" and with that "the cause and effect" of said logic as it plays out in the external realm of the world. (Kahn 21) Contrary to this process stands the unconscious feature of the mind which is led by the primary process in which the logic of the former process is easily rejected for "a strange kind of logic" with "no concept of mutual contradiction or mutual exclusion" (Kahn 21). In Ben Harmon's case, there can be made a direct parallel between Freud's claims of the missing elements of "mutual contradiction or mutual exclusion" (Kahn 21) that shape the perceptual pattern in the primary process. As he is sat by the end of the bed calmly reassuring his wife of the marital salvation that is to enter in the form of their baby, he is well aware of the threat that his pregnant mistress poses to the realization of said salvation. It would seem only logical for him to acknowledge the unlikelihood of a fresh start in the light of the recent reproductive development, and to disclose the truth of the matter as it will undoubtedly be brought to his wife's attention one way or another, but that acknowledgement remains hidden in depths of the unconscious as he is firmly viewing the world through the looking glass of the primary process. His pregnant mistress might have the ability to eliminate his happy ever after for good, but that does not exclude its actualization, because his wife is pregnant as well, and the prospect of that baby is all that matters.

In the scene that follows, Ben is met with the reality of his reproductive predicaments, and much like any other individual steered by an ego starting to lose its grip on the id whilst the guilt inhabited by the super-ego is assuming the position as the dominant emotional response, he

proceeds to run from it, literally. Only, he doesn't get far before an outer voice of reason, in the form of Larry, a man who has been disfigured as a result of his own marital mishaps, urges him to keep from disturbing the progression of his nuclear normativity by any means necessary. Now the narrative widens its take on the ill-fated individual in search of obtaining the approval of nuclear normativity in order to show the how the urge of the repetitive compulsion is also evident in prolongation to the traditional value system of American society based in religion. In the dialogue to follow between the two men Ryan Murphy can perhaps intend to provide a commentary on the symbolism of the American Dream as it manifests itself in the form of the traditional nuclear family. (17:05-18:30) Larry: "What dream are you chasing, or should I say, what dream is chasing you?" Ben: "Leave me alone! Larry: "It's the house isn't it?" "Wrong!" Whatever's tearing you apart the house already knows about it, it'll use it against you." Ben: "Jesus, this not about the house! This is about me, what I did. I cheated on my wife! Hayden, that's her name. She's insisting that I come out to Boston." Ben: "I'm trying very hard not to judge you". Ben: "Me? You murdered your entire family!" Larry: "Yes, but I was never unfaithful. You have no choice, you're gonna have to do the honorable thing to save your family, you're gonna have to lie!" In order to be an honorable family patriarch, the truth, if such truth poses a threat to the idealism of family life, must be buried far beneath the knowledge of your spouse. The prospect of having Ben travel to go be with his pregnant mistress as she is to have an abortion functions to further visualize Freud's composition of the repetitive compulsion and its persistence within human nature. While he knows that secretly meeting with his mistress will pose yet another threat to his already strained marriage, he proceeds to do so in an act that perfectly mirrors Michael Kahn's account and the motivation behind it. By secretly visiting his mistress in an attempt to keep her from permanently entering into his own biological family life, Ben Harmon is searching to "re-create the old unhappy situation once again" (Kahn 97) regardless of his initial intentions. The scene, furthermore, portrays an interesting depiction of value in American society. In the exchange taking place between Ben and Larry above, there is a clear determination of what is the bigger offense a man can make. Larry might have previously said to have killed his family in a house fire, but he has, as he states so very proudly, never broken the promise of fidelity that he made to his wife whilst joined in the sanctity of marriage. Murder in this scene is portrayed as an offense that falls secondary to the act of infidelity, which indicates the placement of marriage as a top priority of social conduct to be performed by mankind. Life, as it is so vividly exemplified in the dialogue above, is worth

something by way of one's actions in relation to societal institutions, such as marriage, and the religious regulations that they entail, not by the fact of life itself.

The following scene that I wish to include continues on with the thematic thread of religion and its steady integration into the cultural approach to reproduction that has proceeded to run through the narrative of the series second episode. We have now moved on from Ben's run from reality and are back in the kitchen of Murder House. Sitting on opposite sides of the kitchen table, Vivian Harmon and Constance Langdon, two women with a mutual dislike for one another, are bonding over the experience of motherhood with a dialogue consisting of honesty that it would seem natural to have occur between two people who had gladly known each other for years. Vivian is sensing the abnormality of her pregnancy and is asking help from a stranger with an eerie character who somehow manages to provide her with a greater confidant than her husband. (20:32- 22:47) Vivian: "Can I ask you a personal question? If you had known about Addie before she was born, would you have done something? When I first met you, you said that if they'd had the tests back then that you might have..." Constance: "Well don't think I didn't think about it, even after she was born. Leaving that little bug-eye out in the cold. That's what they do in China! But, a mother never turns her back on her child. Every one of mine was pure love". Vivian: "You have other kids?" Constance: "I have four. I should've stopped after the first. My womb is cursed. My husband was the spitting image of Van Johnson, you'd think we'd make little cherub children, fat and lively, but it wasn't meant to be. I think our beauty was an affront to the Gods". Vivian: "All four of them had downs?" Constance: "Or some such malady. Except for one, he was a model of physical perfection. He was my gift! But I lost him to other things. Your baby is fine, enough sad talk!" Vivian's pregnancy is a product of an acknowledged union of cultural conformity to the nuclear family. Her child was conceived between two people joined together in the bond of holy matrimony and will hold an element of worth within him or herself as a result. The child that will be born to the young mistress will seemingly be born without such worth in the eyes of society as well as its father. Both children will have the exact same paternal genetics running through them, but only one will have the blessing of fitting into the correct family construction, and therefore figure as the far superior sibling, a symbolic reflection that corresponds fittingly with the gender roles that are presented by Constance in the retelling of her own narrative. As she states so very affirmatively a mother is never to leave her child behind, no matter the circumstances, whereas a father seemingly has the freeing ability to actively select and reject his offspring. A presentation that Ben Harmon fully embodies as he is frantically moving between the exam room of his wife's ultrasounds and the clinic in which his

mistress is to have an abortion. Perhaps as a manner of placing an almost amusing emphasis on how religious symbolism repeatedly accompanies the theme of reproduction, one of the children developing inside the womb of Vivian Harmon, the married woman who had unknowingly intercourse with a supernatural being, to be the spawn of the devil himself, a creative decision that directs further criticism towards the religious regulations on family life that are portrayed to be embedded in American society. Furthermore, the dialogue functions to demonstrate how the implementation of the primary process logic upholds the power of the religious double standard. Should the reproductive practice of the individuals differ from the prescribed image of the ideal family dynamic, it will seemingly be punished in some form from the condemning powers above, or that is the perception that is portrayed through the gaze of Constance Langdon a woman living in a society where too little beauty is considered a tragedy, and too much beauty is as horrific as an affront to the heavenly father himself. The idea of having the religious notion of salvaging properties accompany pregnancy is once again being held under the limelight of Ryan Murphy's contemporary critical media microscope. Man is created in Gods image, and the American family is created in the polished image of the white Pickett fence and George Peter Murdoch's description of the nuclear family as inhabiting "adults of both sexes, at least two of whom maintain a socially approved sexual relationship, and one or more children, own or adopted, of sexually cohabiting adults". (...) (Centeno 2), which provides an interesting contrast to the thematic continuity of religious symbolism and the double standard of American society. In comparing the components of George Peter Murdoch's nuclear family definition with the religious symbolism that has now been vividly established as one of the series main thematic components, Ryan Murphy is giving a critical nod towards the discrepancy existing between the glorified image of the proper American nuclear family, and the intimate regulations that dictate it. There is a prescribed guideline for proper family practice in every aspect of its being, especially the carnal one, which perfectly underlines the powerful presence of the devout double standard ruling supreme. Sex is sinful in this depiction of religion in American society, yet it is the main focal point for everyone involved, and will continue to be so until the very end.

Ep. 3: Murder House

The continuous criticism of the double standard engrained in the traditional views on life and family that rules this fictitious recreation of American society is just as alive and well within the course of the series third episode. As the portrayals of the nuclear family participants start to reflect on the

psychological nature of gender roles, I will move from looking at the two-part system of the primary and secondary processes and incorporate what Freud described as that of the 'pleasure principle' as well as his 'final model of the mind' - a three part structure encompassing the mediation between each drive of the mind in order to fully account for Murphy's critique of how society can, and will, trap the individual inside the biased perception of his or her mind based on gender and reproduction.

The episode opens in the year 1983. We see the good Christian Constance Langdon walking down the hallway of Murder House that leads to the master bedroom. From inside there sounds of screaming and crying can be heard to echo as her husband is fully engaged in forcing himself upon their young maid. Silently she enters the room with the silver barrel of a gun resting in her hand, her arm stretched out and ready to aim. Her first shot is directed at the mirror reflecting the two of them intertwined on the bed. As they both sit up in response to the fired shot, Constance proceeds to shoot her maid right through the eye without blinking herself. Her husband is now standing at the end of the bed, pants unbuttoned, looking at his wife. Constance takes the word and sets the justifying tone for her following action from which there is no escaping. (2:03-2:50) Constance: "I've loved you since I was sixteen!" Hugo Langdon: "Sweetheart, please! This... This, this didn't mean anything!" Constance: "You broke my heart for the last time!" As she makes her claim, Constance fires three shots at her husband, all of them piercing his chest and leaving a stream of blood trickling down his neatly ironed shirt as his body hits the bed for the second time that afternoon. As the rage lifts itself from her gaze, she goes to sit on the bed. Placing herself at the edge of the sheets, she removes her massive golden earrings which have undoubtedly been gifts from her husband who is now lying lifeless beside her. As the reality of her actions become clear to her she collapses in tears next to the man she has loved for the majority of her life, taking his hand in hers. As she does this, the timeframe of Murder House returns to the present of 2011 and the narrative once again revolves around Ben and Vivian Harmon who continues to visualize the same manner of marital dysfunction set in the aftermath of a crisis. With the disclosure of Constance Langdon's past and present as it was, and continues to be lived inside Murder House by different people showing the exact same pattern of marital misery, Ryan Murphy is perhaps aiming to reflect the gender bias of American society with the same sharply loaded aim as that of the gun going off in the early 80's. The critique that is given in the sequences of Constance Langdon's time traveling narrative is one that has been alluded to in the preceding episodes: Men are eternally unfaithful (whether that man is Hugo Langdon in 1983 or Ben Harmon in 2011) and women are emotionally

unstable (such as Constance Langdon killing her husband in cold blood and Vivian Harmon seemingly hallucinating nonconsensual sexual encounters whilst alone in her bedroom).

Furthermore his depiction points to how the societal interpretation of the relationship between mind and gender has come to influence the way in which men and women are expected to act in relation to their respective drives and urges, and in the case of *American Horror Story*, especially the sexual ones. The episode also unveils the dysfunction of the first family to ever live beneath the roof of Murder House, demonstrating how the pattern of incompatibility between the individual and his or her given social role has been present from the very beginning. Charles and Nora Montgomery who build the decadent construction of a picture perfect household in 1921 was as unlikely to succeed in their quest to capture the essence of George Peter Murdoch nuclear recipe as any of the families following in their footsteps. (22:46-24:26) Nora: "You're a disgrace, Charles. How you can call yourself a man is beyond me. You think I came all the way here from Philadelphia for this? This life, this house?" Charles: "I build you this house! Exactly the way you wanted it!" Nora: "And how many servants do we have? Two! And I'm expected to do everything else! Good, Charles. Drink your talent away! You're a waste. Even looking at you I am sick to my stomach." Charles: "You'll see, they will write articles about me one day in the Boston Medical Journal." Nora: "HA! Good Charles, break everything! Daphne, when you hear the baby crying come in right away and take him upstairs!" Servant: "Yes, Mam!" Nora: "They came again today, the bill collectors. Charles! Do you hear me?" Charles: "I'm not deaf! Would that I were." Nora: "Now you listen to me, you are going to support this family one way or the other! I've arranged for a girl to come tomorrow morning with 60 dollars cash. She's in trouble, she probably has friends. So you better not be blotto." The scene not only portrays a family on the edge of failure by Murdoch's definition as it is plagued by the pressure of financial inadequacy, it also depicts the fatal combination of a husband unable to perform adequately in his role as breadwinner due his vices, and a wife unable, or, perhaps rather unwilling to parent her child, but doing so out of normative instruction without giving the realities of her own capability much thought. As Murder House is perhaps meant to function as a metaphor for the overall construction of American society, Murphy provides an illustration of the nuclear family as something that has been and will continue to be destined for failure in the hands of mere mortals even if those mortals are attempting to succeed 100 years apart. The theme of infidelity as it is envisioned through the psychological constructions of gender in the context of the nuclear family poses an interesting opportunity for the audience to view this fictional portrayal of gender bias through the factual theory of Sigmund Freud's completed model of the

mind. In his so called final model, the three agencies of the 'id', 'superego' and 'ego' all come to represent a functional aspect of the collective construction of the human conscious. As stated in the earlier section Michael Kahn described the id as: "the repository of the instinctual drives, sexual and aggressive", the superego as: "our conscience" and, lastly, the ego as: "the executive function" (26-27). Gender bias, as Murphy illustrates it, can perhaps be said to lean on the theoretical propositions of Freud in order to make potent point on the manner in which psychology is used by society to prescribe men and women with an understanding of the opposite sex, rather than to have them find it on their own. Gender roles can in the context of this critical reconstruction be viewed as a sociologically constructed interpretation rather than an actual fact. When looking at the sequence above there is an interesting connection to be made between Freud's agencies and the dividing function they are given in between the sexes. Psychologically the construction of 'id' can be argued to be identical between the two marital participants, but has been divided between each gender in order to secure a detectable sociological difference. As it is portrayed in the fictional narratives, men are driven by sexual urges and women are driven by the merciless grip of instincts verging on insanity that will dominantly be credited as a result of a hormonal imbalance, which will be demonstrated repeatedly in the following examples that detail the socially defining powers of reproduction. By the Freudian definition the 'instinctual drives' are held under the same psychological umbrella as the 'sexual' ones, making Murphy's portrayal of the biased distribution between the genders a valid critical claim, challenging the general assumption that men are all sexually inclined to follow urges whereas women are all inclined to follow vengeful urges. Up until this point, the series approach to gender roles within a marriage has been set in the old reoccurring pattern. Men are driven by what Freud described as 'the pleasure principle' which characterizes the nature of the primary process. As Michael Kahn writes it: "The pleasure principle requires *pleasure! now!*"(23). Both Ben Harmon and Hugo Langdon are men who have acted in order to gain an immediate sexual pleasure outside their marriage with no speculation to what the consequences might be, and women have continuously been portrayed to be without such a drive, until now, for as she pulls the trigger on her cheating husband, Constance Langdon is fully engaged with the voice of her inner pleasure principle, and the pleasure that killing her husband brings her is as immediate as any other. In having Constance at once both contradict and conform to the bias directed at her gender (shooting her husband exemplifies her acting in her id much like the impulse driven man, while the act of actually committing murder as a result of being betrayed validates the bias of the mentally unstable and aggressive female), Murphy is creating a critical commentary on

the missing ability to recognize the fact that there is indeed no rule without an exception, no matter how long that given rule has functioned as a base for determining the psychological patterns of social practice between the genders.

This commentary on gender bias continues on throughout the episode and is emphasized further by the thematic element of pregnancy as it demonstrates just how easily it is to have the old patriarchal norm surface itself in the scenery of a new beginning. In the previous episode, Vivian and Violet Harmon experienced a near fatal encounter with a death cult as they were trapped inside Murder House. Ben Harmon remained missing from the scene as he was miles away with his mistress who was to have an abortion. Upon returning to his disheveled family he sees no other option than to go in and take on the role of caretaker for his distressed wife who he deems to be in a desperate need of therapy. (4:05-5:03) Ben: Honey, you're having PTSD this is a total normal response! We just need to find you a therapist that our insurance will cover, right away!" Vivian: "Don't make me feel like I'm Crazy. I have an appointment with the realtor tomorrow, I'm gonna talk to her about what kind of home improvements we can make. Hopefully nothing too expensive, maybe something with the backyard... Hopefully we can sell the place without taking too much of a loss." Ben: "Sure. I'm sure we can." Vivian: "Don't lie to me again. If you lie to me again we're through!" Like the narrative of 1983 there is a predetermined function given to each marital participant. The husband is given the role of the controlling element mediating the voice of reason, despite his own lack of ability to control his sexual urges, whilst his wife is placed in the role of the irrational recipient of such superior reason. The dialogue that takes place between the contemporary couple confirms the gender bias towards the female sex and the prejudice surrounding the relationship between biology (hormones) and mentality, as it is here represented by Ben Harmon's character as a way of conveniently projecting the scrutinizing focal point of the relationship unto the other participant. By centering his attention on Vivian's reactional pattern as she is in a state of emotional turmoil, he successfully removes it from his own questionable behavior as a case of failing mental health in an expectant mother will always outweigh any other problematic. This action is repeated just 30 minutes later as he stands face to face with the woman whom he had promised his wife never to see again. As his young mistress stands before him exclaiming how she expects him to leave his wife and make room in his life for the new life that is developing inside her, he resolves to place her under the same unstable label as his wife, however, with a less friendly tone. (36:52-37:12) "Ben: Hayden this is crazy, you're acting crazy!" Hayden: "Do not call me crazy, I am not crazy" Ben: "Calm down!" Hayden: "I'm angry. And I'm PREGNANT!" The repetitive pattern of Ben

Harmon's enacted gender bias towards the women in his reproductive circle is both interesting as well as foreshadowing of a deeper message. Although he himself is made to represent the male version of the psychologically appointed gender bias that is portrayed to run deep within the construction of American society (he is by definition of his actions both unfaithful and unreliable as a result of being caught in the current of his sexual instincts), he is seemingly blinded when it comes to recognizing his own blatantly biased performance of modern day patriarchy. This visualization of the everlasting double standard could be meant by Murphy to communicate the need for self-reflection in a society with a notable interest for the actions and abilities of the people living next to them. If you enact gender bias towards others, you will likely come to see it in yourself, much like Ben Harmon.

Ep. 4: Halloween- part 1

As the three previous episodes have brought a vivid demonstration of how traditional values seemingly come into power by way of their beneficial function to the individual advocating them Ryan Murphy, in this episode, lends room to have the critical reflection on the devout religious reasoning of many an American home reach out and perhaps touch upon a contemporary debate on reproductive rights that has seemingly been ongoing forever. Gender bias is shown to run through each family entering inside the house, much like financial instability and reproductive difficulty.

The episode opens on Halloween night 2010- a year prior to the present day. (0:14-3:06) The scenery is the kitchen of Murder House in which Chad, one of the two owners, is neatly baking festive treats and arranging ghostly decorations. From the living room his partner Pat emerges and goes to fetch his gym bag exclaiming: "I'll be home around four." As he does this, Chad reaches in front of him, resting his hands on the shoulders of his partner and giving a plea for him to skip the workout. Chad: "I need help! Carving these pumpkins. Pat: "Who is that?" Chad: "It's Marie Antoinette, doing our French famous figures this year." Pat: "I'm hitting the gym!" Chad: "Well, make sure you wear a condom! And pick me up some Gala apples! I thought these Golden Delicious would look dramatic in the bopping bucket but they just look dull and depressing. There's no contrast." Returning from the front door through which he was about to make his escape, Pat takes up the passive aggressive conflict that his partner has initiated: "Why would I wear a condom at the gym?" Chad: "Maybe because you're screwing that twink trainer of yours! And I need gourds, I'm going to hang them on the tree out front! Spray paint them, and they're gonna be these clever little organic ghosts. " Pat: "You know what, I am!" Chad: "You are what?" Pat: "Screwing

my trainer, and you know what else? He's a power bottom! He loves it!" Chad: "First of all, please remember our agreement. Don't ask, don't tell. Secondly, is this crass admission supposed to... Hurt me? At this point? With you? I'm bulletproof! And I need some dry ice, and have you picked up a costume?" Pat: "Why are you doing this?" Chad: "Because there's gonna be a party here in three days!" Pat: "This is all bullshit! This is all bullshit! Everything we've become is bullshit! I don't give a shit about carving pumpkins! I want love! I want passion! And I want a relationship with a man, not Martha Stewart!" Chad: "Then leave! Oh, I forgot that you can't, because all of your money, and mine, is in this house that we agreed to flip and make a mint on, and now we can't because the economy is in the shitter. Do you think I like carving 20 pumpkins and getting squash guts under my nails? I'm TRYING HERE! I'm trying. To make this place warm and inviting and spectacular, and have this Halloween party shot by ELLE freaking Décor so someone will swoop in and take this place off our hands, and then I can feel free to fall in love with a 25 year old who has great biceps, so get off my back! Carve a Goddamn pumpkin; go get a Goddamn outfit and man up!" Pat: "I can't believe this is who we have become... Hollow queens arguing over pumpkins... We wanted to have a baby... We were gonna have this... Great life!" This episode introduces another aspect of gender bias in the confines of an overtly traditional society, whilst continuing on with the critique of nuclear family life as something that is made available to a selected demographic and remains forever unobtainable to anyone who tries to obtain it. As it is demonstrated in the scene above, there is no detectable difference between the incompatibility faced by Chad and Pat and those equally experienced by Ben and Vivian. However, there is a difference between the interpretations of the effect that this incompatibility will have on their family's fate. For Ben and Vivian Harmon, there is no throwing in the towel, no matter how overdue that action of surrender might be. For Chad and Pat the dream has long since burst as a same sex family is met with enough bias to put them on the wrong side of the nuclear family, no matter what they do. Not only are they both desire driven men, they are also given the bias a having the mental instability of a woman. Much as it is uttered by Chad in the transcribed dialogue, there is indeed no "contrast" to be found in in the scheme of traditional gender roles which is "depressing" for the individual, both fitting in and differing from it. If you are a straight couple, as it was established within the previous episode, you will be unhappy by way of your husband's unfaithful urges or your wife's erratic tendencies, if you are a gay couple, you are bound to be unhappy by the exact same measures as you, as well as your partner, are expected to stray and to then react to it by giving in to the better part of your emotions. Once again the repetitive compulsion of reproductive reparation is shown as

a tool that is thought to be readily available for those who are determent to stay within the walls of their faulty family creation. As it has been shown through the dynamic of Ben and Vivian, and even in the brief glimpse into the dynamic of Constance and her husband, there is a constant repetition of disappointment to be associated with the creation of a nice and normal nuclear family as the people housed within it are seemingly all unconsciously looking for an escape, as the following sequence will demonstrate. (16:18-16:53) Chad: “Your husband seems very...” Vivian: “Handsome?” Chad: “Nervous. I don’t know, it’s just a feeling I get, a... Um. Darkness.” Vivian: “Seems like you and Pat are having problems?” Chad: “Yeah, he can’t keep his dick in his pants.” Vivian: “You caught him cheating?” Chad: “Yes. I’m a sneak and a snoop.” Vivian: “How?” Chad: “It’s easy. Cellphone records. You can delete a text, but you can’t erase the bill.” (...) (29:40-30:07) Ben: “Are you okay?” Vivian: “I don’t believe you, Ben! You tell me your story, but there’s a little glimmer in your eye, a little lie... Little darkness. And I don’t wanna live with suspicion anymore. So I want you to go. I want you to go.” The redundancy of infidelity and rejection that the episode underlines between the two contemporary couples both in terms of reproductive hope and unfaithful repetition is perhaps made to highlight the incompatibility that manifests itself the modern practice of old norms and to further demonstrate the repressive nature of the traditional social practice of nuclear normativity that Ryan Murphy continues to debunk. If you get the dream house and have the perfect child, all your American dream fantasies of nuclear family bliss are still not guaranteed to come true. The expectation of the “great life” that Pat recalls from his distant memory will not automatically fall into place as having all of the pieces does not ultimately make the puzzle, although that seems to be the general conviction for each couple involved. Furthermore, the topic of crime and punishment as it is implemented in the confines of reproductive practice is shown through the tragic story of the original owners as it is told in totality, and with it, it brings a morality flavored food for thought that underlines Murphy’s seasoning usage of religious symbolism in order to direct the viewer towards a traditionalist debate that is still alive and well today: Are you able to respect human life if you accept the possibility of reproductive choice? The storyline of the Montgomery’s whom one is introduced to in the previous episode illustrate the traditional perception of what were to happen if man came to breach the gap between God and God fearing, and those consequences bring a horrifying hint as to why it is best to stay within the line. In performing abortions, the doctor takes the role of ruler of life and death upon himself, only to have it backfire on his family in the most extreme of circumstances. As it is stated in the Old Testament, as well as it is on the phone to the doctor’s wife with the sentiment: (20:35-22:39) “an eye for an

eye, a tooth for a tooth” there is nothing more certain for the traditionalist American than the coming of consequences in the wake of what is considered improper behavior.

Ep. 5: Halloween- part 2

This section will focus further on the continuous theme of the double standard encompassed by the nuclear family and the gender bias that it possesses through its overtly patriarchal delegation of reproductive power taking place within the marital relationship of Ben and Vivian Harmon. As the theme of reproduction is now starting to widen itself to encompass the symbolism of the supernatural afterlife residing in Murder House, and the emotional drives and deceased dreams about the nuclear family that it represents, I will implement Freud’s instincts of life and death and continue on with the triple structure of the mind model in an attempt to capture the message that is being sent by the creator of the series on the relationship between the character’s mortality and the immortal battle of keeping the nuclear family alive.

The episode opens with a recap of the previous hours unfolding throughout the course of the occult celebrations of Halloween night. They have been tense, and they have brought a multitude of discoveries with them, one of the most prominent being Vivian’s awareness of the continued contact taking place between her husband and his former mistress. As they stand in the family kitchen, there is no denying that the road to the Harmon family’s recovery is at yet another standstill. Ben has sincerely promised one thing and proceeded to do the opposite one too many times, and his wife is ready to finally close the door to their happy home. He, however, is not, regardless of what the reality of their relationship reflects in the light of day as he declares from the top of his lungs (4:03): “I’m not giving up on this family. You hear me? I’m not giving up on this family!” Where the narrative has previously been turned primarily towards Ben and his attempts to redeem the destruction caused by his sexual indiscretions, this episode zooms in on the interaction that takes place between the two women placed at the center of the depicted marital conflict between a man’s sexual drives and the difficulty that it poses for the fulfilment of his societal dream of a family. The following scene contains the much overdue confrontation between the wife and the mistress who together figure as the pieces of Ben Harmon’s unsolvable nuclear family puzzle. (12:52-14:13) Hayden: “You called me?” Vivian: Yeah, I did. I think it’s time for us to have a conversation. Hayden: “Has he told you about Boston?” Vivian: “Here’s the thing, Hayden. I know that you might find this hard to believe, but I was your age once too, and not really that long ago. And I wasn’t such a saint, either. I fell in love with a married man, and I lived and breathed the

fantasy that we were going to be together forever, soulmates, and lovers, and everyone was going to be happy, and everybody lived forever. And that didn't happen, Hayden. Cause it never happens that way, it never does, cause what he is looking for has nothing to do with you, it has got nothing to do with anybody, there's something missing in him". Hayden: "He found something in me he'll never find in you again. He said my face was soft like a baby, and between my thighs I tasted like raspberry's and cream". Vivian: "You know what I really regret? When I walked in on you screwing my husband? Was that I didn't just rip your smug little face off!" The exchange between the two women reintroduces the defense mechanism of repression that was touched upon in the pilot as it is making itself known in the heated declarations of Vivian Harmon. Repression can be boiled down to the act of turning a blind eye to towards the emotional responses that we wish to have eliminated from the realm of our conscience. As Michael Kahn describes it: "Repression means excluding an impulse or a feeling from consciousness. Thus it is the manipulation of the perception of an internal event." (123). As she states so very clearly Vivian herself knows that the happy ever after is obsolete as well as what it feels like to disrupt that very illusion. As she proclaims to Hayden in the dialogue above, she is well aware of her husband's compulsion to cheat as well as his id driven and incomplete nature, but she still stays put in her role as the mistreated Mrs. Harmon angry and entitled, who, despite the acknowledgement of her husband's dark and desiring nature has been and will continue to be hurt. She can easily be said to perform the painfully pleasurable repetitive compulsion as much as the husband whose actions have led her to that very moment of unsweetened truth unfolding between mistress and Mrs. Every time she throws him out she takes him back as a way of unconsciously continuing the pain that is provided by her shattered expectations. The dialogue continues on between the two women as they come to face each other inside the master bedroom of Murder House. The supernatural element of the series is taken into use as a gesture providing yet another symbolic message for the viewer to associate with their own social conduct. Your secrets will surface themselves, no matter how deeply you put them in the ground. Hayden is not only pregnant with Ben Harmon's child, she is also the skeleton in his closet, or rather, the skeleton buried in his backyard. In an unfortunate turn of events Hayden was murdered whilst confronting the married man with whom she saw her bright and shiny family future. Panicked by the reality of what had happened, he proceeded to bury her on the property of a home that would never be hers, and now she is back from underneath their lawn to confront the woman who has it all, including a marriage to a man who is a relieved accessory to murder. (25:09-26:33) Hayden:" How well do you know your husband?" Vivian: "Too well, get out". Hayden:

“What do you think that he is capable of? Adultery, clearly. What about murder?” Vivian: “If you’re trying to shock me, show me how enlightened you are about my perfect life... You’re a little late. Leave!” Hayden: “Not until you know, not until understand, really understand who it is you’re married to. It’s all I want, Vivian. For you to know the truth. That’s why we have to talk about Boston, about the pregnancy, about everything.” Vivian: “He told you I’m pregnant?” Hayden: “What? You’re pregnant? Oh God, that’s why! That’s why... “It’s your choice”, he said. “Yours”. Oh, but there’s never any other choice. He didn’t want me to keep my baby, because he already had yours”. (...). (28:05-28:36) Hayden: “I’m not some silly schoolgirl, I’m a woman. And I matter!” Vivian: “You’re hurt.” Hayden: “Yes! I’m hurt! He hurt me, and he’ll hurt you and that baby, that’s why it’s better for you and for it... If we just end this now. I’m going to cut it out of you.” The interaction that is portrayed in the scenes between Hayden and Vivian once again comes to demonstrate how the concept of worth is only obtainable to the individual through the act of proper reproduction. It also functions to further confirm the already well-established production of traditional gender roles. Hayden’s unstable and aggressive behavior combined with the constant expression of her wish to matter perfectly demonstrates the gender bias that Murphy is reflecting. A woman has to perform reproductively to matter, and her worth is determined by the reaction given from the man to that very reproduction. If a man wants to acknowledge a woman’s offspring, and with that, take on his reproductive responsibility by acknowledging his very own presence growing within her, she is given a worth. Not only is she fulfilling her biological purpose, she is becoming one with the man. Furthermore, Hayden’s immediate realization that she had no legitimate choice in the matter of her own pregnancy after all speaks loudly of the fact that there is still a dominant distribution of emotional power to the man’s choice of validation in the context of contemporary reproduction. Hayden did indeed have the freedom of choice, but if her choice differed from the choice made by Ben, it wouldn’t really matter. This critique on the traditional manner of measuring worth by way of biological function and social performance is at full display, and sends a message that is meant to echo far beyond the fiction that it consists of. In order to complete the critical enlightenment of reproductive revelations, I wish to include what Freud described as the instincts of life and death in the collected work from 1955:

For on our hypothesis the ego- instincts arise from the coming to life of inanimate matter and seek to restore the inanimate state; whereas regards the sexual instincts, though it is true that they reproduce primitive states of the organism, what they are clearly aiming at by every possible means is the coalescence of two germ-cells which

are differentiated in a particular way. If this union is not effected, the germ-cell dies along with all the other elements of the multicellular organism. It is only on this condition that the sexual function can prolong the cell's life and lend it the appearance of immortality. (...) and we should consequently feel relieved if the whole structure of our argument turned out to be mistaken. The opposition between the ego or death instincts and the sexual or life instincts would then cease to hold and the compulsion to repeat would no longer possess the importance we have ascribed to it. (*Beyond the Pleasure Principle* 44).

As it was proposed by Freud himself in the 1950's, reproduction is an act of repetition that is made with the intention of keeping the one's self alive whilst the drives and urges of the id continues to lead towards the alluring prospect of self-destruction. Mankind is programmed to at once both preserve and pulverize their own existence through the mediums of sexual instincts and biological procreation, much like it can be seen in the actions of Ben Harmon who performs so very adequately in the role of the repeatedly failing family man. As a possible tribute to the reality of Freud's hypothesis of psychological contrast, the episode ends with Chad exclaiming the core problematic that presents itself in the search for the American family dream. (36:53-37:20) "I feel like I'm doomed for all of eternity to be trapped in an unhappy adulterous relationship, working on this Goddamned house... Which will never be just the way I want it!" The nuclear family is a construction that will remain unobtainable to the individual as he or she will always have a finger placed on the trigger of the death instinct, whether that instinct manifests itself as cheating (as it has been assigned to the male gender) or as taking the life of a cheater (as shown by the female). It is indeed a beautiful sentiment of social practice, but it will forever be incompatible with the internal drive of the human mind.

Ep. 6: Piggy Piggy

As it has been thoroughly established the socio realistic depiction of American society that is seen in American Horror Story corresponds fittingly with the many opposing forces of Freudian psychology as they are made to manifest themselves within the cinematic portrayal the nuclear family. The main critical focal point of family and the many variations of double standards that figure within it frequently exhibit the repetitive pattern of a dominant primary process wanting to keep something alive, more precisely, a family, a marriage, and a notion of love that is long gone in the realistic aspect of the secondary processes. Following closely behind the patriarchal gender bias

that has been frequently introduced in the previous episodes, the focus is now turned towards the cultural connotations of the maternal function and drive which has seemingly been stalled in the traditional confines of its religious definition.

The sixth episode flips the coin on the religious symbolism that has continuously been incorporated into reproductive narrative of the contemporary family by demonstrating how Vivian's supernatural pregnancy is met by a society where the perception of female sexuality still has a foothold in religion. An intentional approach to creative continuity as the number 6 is often associated with the task of reaching contact with the devil. The first instance in which the episode points towards the present day power to be found in the ancient scriptures of the Bible takes place between Violet Harmon and a former enemy who has been unfortunate enough to meet the devil himself. In the time that has since followed she has made it a priority to acquaint herself with the Biblical account for the evil being, and what she has learnt brings a chilling message for any woman who believes that her fate is decided from above. (24:59-25:49) "The devil is real! And he's not a little red man with horns and a tail. He can be beautiful! Cause he's a fallen angel, and he used to be God's favorite! You read the Book of Revelation?" Violet: "No?" "In heaven, there's this woman in labor, howling in pain! And there's a, there's a red dragon with seven heads, waiting, so he can eat her baby! But, the archangel Michael, he hurls the dragon down to earth. From that moment on, the red dragon hates the woman and declares war on her and all of her children! That's us!" In including the symbolism of the red dragon as a euphemism for a woman's menstrual cycle as well the notion of an unrelenting unearthly war between the woman and the forces of evil, Ryan Murphy is perhaps demonstrating how the difference in power between men and women that is still visible today is one that has seemingly been there since the beginning of time. A woman's reproductive cycle is the testament of an ongoing supernatural war between her and the evil force of a mythical creature so unholy that it has been cast out of heaven. While it might not have been the woman who hurled the dragon from its heavenly home according to the scripture, in fact it was the male archangel, it is onto her that its hatred falls, and if something that evil can find hatred towards her then the woman must be deserving of it one way or another. There are no dragons in this horror story, but there is indeed an element of that same ancient damnation ascribed towards the woman who dares to have a child whilst on her merry way out of wedlock. As Vivian Harmon moves along in her pregnancy she begins to show signs of the unnatural being that is coming to life within her, and as it grows in force the more she comes to act in accordance with the pattern of Julia Kristeva's abjectivity that has previously been introduced as a theoretical composition with which one can try to fathom the

dark and dim corners of human behavior. In short, the abject as it is fittingly defined by Kristeva herself in the 1982 translation of her essay “Powers of Horror” opposes itself to the Freudian reasoning regulations of the superego and provides a state of unease that will leave a permanent reflection. She writes:

To each ego its object, to each superego its abject. It is not the white expanse or slack boredom of repression, not the translations and transformations of desire that wrench bodies, nights, and discourse: rather it is a bruited suffering that, “I” puts up with, sublime and devastated, for “I” deposits it to the father’s account (...) I endure it, for I imagine that such is the desire of the other. A massive and sudden emergence of uncanniness, which, familiar as it might have been in an opaque and forgotten life, now harries me as radically separate, loathsome. Not me. Not that. But not nothing, either. A “something” that I do not recognize as a thing. A weight of meaninglessness, about which there is nothing insignificant, and which crushes me. On the edge of non-existence and hallucination, of reality that, if I acknowledge it, annihilates me. (Kristeva 2).

The following scene shows Vivian Harmon as she is sat by her kitchen counter. It’s lunchtime and her maid has a culinary surprise in store. (29:29-30:26) Moira: “It’s the most nutritious organ of them all. It came from an organic farm. I hear the raw food movement is really taking off! For the baby!” Before Vivian there is a dish on which the raw brain of a cow sits readily with a green leaf on top. At first her response is repulsion, but after a while that same emotion evolves into a gnawing hunger. As she eats every last bite of the uncooked organ, licking her fingers as she scoops up the bloody pieces of soft frontal lobe, she looks from the empty dish holding only her fork and up and around the room. No one saw her, but she was definitely not acting on her own. The action of Vivian eating raw brains for the sake of her baby driven by an unknown internal force of abjectivity defines the beginning moments of her unraveling both mentally as well as in the eyes of the family that is supposed to love her, and it doesn’t stop there. As she is beginning to fear the true nature of her unborn fetus, she decides to pay a visit to the last person who had access to see it, her ultrasound technician, who upon meeting the child growing inside Vivian’s womb proceeded to leave her medical profession behind in order to connect with a higher power. (35:22-36:16) Vivian: “When they gave me the address I didn’t realize it was a church.” Ultrasound technician: “It’s where I feel safe!” Vivian: “The hospital said you quit your job, but they didn’t say why. I’ve been concerned

because of the ultrasound, and, they said that the machine malfunctioned, but... It seemed to me that you saw something that scared you?" Ultrasound technician: "Yes, and I've been praying about it ever since. I saw the unclean thing, what you carry in your womb! The plague of nations, the beast! ". Vivian: "Okay, so you didn't see anything. So, the machine malfunctioned!" Ultrasound technician: "It did not! I saw the little hooves! Vivian: "You need some help!" Ultrasound technician: "And the woman was full of the filthiness of her fornication! The mother of harlots, and abominations of the earth!" The religious statements of the technician all come to underline the thematic element of the abject female as she is defined in the symbolic realm of religion. As it is stated in Julia Kristeva's definition above there is a resurfacing of past experiences that inflict the person with the same "uncanniness" (Kristeva 2) as that which Vivian is feeling from within. Her so called "forgotten life"(Kristeva 2) is likely meant to be that of the Biblical woman, whom the previous scene functioned to introduce, sitting in heaven side by side with a monster whilst helplessly howling in pain. When viewed as a critique of the reproductive double standard Vivian's pregnancy is not only different because her child is half devil, it is also different because it is happening in the context of damning nuclear family dissolve for which she is made to suffer. In the light of Julia Kristeva's abject reproduction can be seen as a process which adapts itself to mean something greatly different for each gender as it provides the viewer with the visualization of a deathly gender bias that ties it all together in the thread of religious symbolism. For Ben, it's a salvation. For Vivian, it becomes her divinely dictated doom.

Ep. 7: Open House

This section will move the focus from the premise of investigating the double standard of the nuclear family and its desire driven reproductive norm as can be seen in the sections above, and instead proceed to have it placed onto the thematic elements of desire and denial with which Ryan Murphy makes his very real fictitious critique on the unhealthy relationship existing between the American individual and his or her self-recognition.

The episode opens in the year is 1994. Constance Langdon is sitting by the fireplace inside the Murder House living room, her address at the time. The phone is hanging from the wall by its cord, beeping. Her boyfriend Larry, the burn victim we've previously seen accompanying Ben Harmon in the present day, is kneeling by her side, his unscarred face folded in a worried frown as he tentatively asks her what she was told from the other end of the line. (0:05-2:14) Larry: "What did they say" Constance: "They're gonna charge me with criminal child neglect. They're going to take

him away. Place him in an institution. My boy, my poor God. Now you know how he is.” Larry: “I know!” Constance: “How he suffers so when he’s not with me! If you have any feelings for me at all..” Larry: “You know I love you! I would do anything for you.” Constance: “Then do it. Like we discussed.” The scene shifts from the living room to the darkness of the attic. As Larry opens the attic door you hear a muffled grunt whilst pair of feet becomes visible in the frame, around one of them a chain has been secured and it rattles as the boy, “Bo”, moves himself around. He is eagerly pushing a tiny red ball towards his mother’s boyfriend, not seeming to mind the chain at all. As he moves into the light, you see that his face is nothing you would expect to match the playful nature of his actions, as it is greatly deformed. The time is late at night, and Bo is tucked into bed. As he lays there resting, the favor that Constance asked for is performed swiftly, as her boyfriend suffocates her unconventional child with a pillow solemnly saying the words: “God help me!” In this scene the viewer is given yet another look into the critical reflection of society where the righteous individual has the ability to draw the line between right and wrong as they best see it fit. Much like Larry did in the second episode of the series, Constance is placing murder as an act to be considered more acceptable, perhaps even more humane, than the alternative. Her child is not to leave his family and the safety of her house, even if that safety comes with a ball and chain, she would rather see him leave the world of the living. Murder can be mercy, and in the case of Constance, murdering her child even becomes a symbol of her motherly love. This relocation of murder from an abject action to the only proper alternative in the face of unconventional sin is also shown from the perspective of the original family as the Montgomery’s had their actions come back and haunt them in the shape of a jar collection holding the severed remains of their kidnapped baby. There soon became no alternative more just than to end the suffering of all involved. (21:00-23:01) Nora: “I was wrong about you, Charles. You are a genius.” Charles: “How long I have waited to hear you say that. All I wanted was to prove myself” Nora: “How on earth did you do it?” Charles: “I used the beating heart from one of our girls.” Nora: “Amazing.” Charles: “Nora, where is the baby?” Nora: “I thought he was hungry, I tried to nurse him, but, it wasn’t milk he was craving. We’re damned, Charles. Because of what we did to those girls, those poor innocent girls, and, and their babies.” (...) Murder House Tour speaker: “Legend has it that the ghost of Nora Montgomery still haunts these very halls. As does her beloved, if mutilated toddler. The Montgomery’s suicide was only the first of many to occur behind these bloody walls”. Both Constance and Nora seemingly committed their crimes in the name of family, but the real motivations were based in self-preservation. Constance did not want to be exposed as an unfit parent and Nora detested the

thought of having to perform the demanding task of raising her child on her own without convince of having a servant doing the dirty work. Neither woman was fit to parent, and yet parental responsibility became their primary tool for gracing their existence with a purpose of undisputable social acceptability. In taking the life of her husband as well as her own, Nora Montgomery made amends for her failure as a member of a family that was literally cut to pieces as a response to the unholy nature of her actions. The parallel narratives of Constance and Nora symbolize the moral fluidity that presents itself in a society where life is worth something on a scale of success rate, if it shows promise then it must be kept alive, if it does not death becomes the vindicating way of action. The determination of whether or not the time is up on the dream depends on the eyes who view it. Constance and Nora were at the end of the road, as much as the Harmon's, only neither Ben nor Vivian is willing to fully open their eyes to that truth. The following scene continues down that same path of critical reflection as it shows the Harmon's as they are all gathered around the dinner table, parents placed on opposite sides and the child at the end of the table between them. Whilst reflecting the image of a nuclear structure they come to perfectly exemplify the manner in which the social role of being a parent never ceases to provide an easy access to a bulletproof justification for your actions, despite how little truth there is to it. (10:02-11:59) Vivian: "You're not eating anything." Violet: "Not hungry, pretty stuffed on bullshit." Ben: "Your mother and I know that you're upset; maybe there are some things you wanna talk about?" Violet: "Like who I'm gonna live with after you get divorced? Is there a third option, cause both of you kinda make me want to kill myself. Is that what you guys are afraid of? Why else would you want actually try and deal with a problem?" Ben: "You never leave your room, you barely eat, these are textbook signs of depression! We're very concerned, Vi." Violet: "Look, you guys dragged me all the way out here to save our family, then you decide to break up. You buy a house that I actually like, then you're telling me you're selling it, without even asking me what I want. So fine, I'm depressed, but I'm not gonna off myself, so you can go back to your policy of benign neglect." Vivian: "Maybe we should stop trying to sell this place". Ben: "I don't know, I mean was that so much worse than usual? Given the circumstances? We need to stay on her, but we are selling this house, if that's, if that's even possible." Vivian: "We have two perspective buyers. One guy who's a Persian I think." Ben: "And the other?" Vivian: "The other guys has this really badly burned face, I feel terrible for him. And I'm going on the Murder House tour with Marcy, so that I can get all the details of what happened in this house, and give full disclosure before anyone commits!" Ben: "Well, you're only required by law to disclose anything that happened in the last three years." Vivian: "I know, but I'm

not knowingly putting someone through what we've been through." Ben: "But you've got them on the hook, I mean, you tell them about all the insanity in this place you're gonna blow the sale!"

Vivian: "It's the right thing to do." Ben: "The right thing to do is to get out from under this mess, so we can pick up the pieces, so our daughter can!" Vivian: "It must be so great to be able to do that, to just flick a switch and be able to justify your own bad behavior!" Ben: "My family comes first!"

Vivian: "Since when?" Ben: "Do not screw up selling this house!"

Much like Violet states it herself there is a dominant tendency of denial going on between the parental figures who are supposed to provide her with a stable notion of an everyday life. Not only are her parents repeatedly falling back into their compulsory pattern of infidelity and blameful rejection, they are blatantly neglecting to acknowledge the impact that their social practice leaves behind on the child that they are supposedly doing it all for. In their heated dialogue Ben and Vivian Harmon once again openly engage with the reality of their doomed dream of starting anew, and yet they still manage to dance delicately around the scary reality of the situation. The flickering switch between right and wrong that Vivian is referring to in relation to the actions of her husband is a defense mechanism that is dualistically present in both spouses. Firstly, in Ben who embodies it and secondly, in Vivian who shares her life with that very embodiment, despite her unhappy recognition of its presence. The psychological function of denial as it is explained by Michael Kahn is one that corresponds greatly not only with the Harmon family, but with the previous actions of Constance acting in her parental role as well: "protecting myself from anxiety by failing to perceive or by misperceiving something in the world outside of my own thoughts and feelings". (126). According to Michael Kahn, the act of projection follows closely behind the mechanism of denial as it: "refers to protecting oneself from anxiety by repressing a feeling and misperceiving another person as having that feeling." (128). This psychoanalytical combination of defense mechanisms provides a validation to Ryan Murphy's critical depiction on parental misuse as the misperceptions of Constance, Ben and Vivian all have one major thing in common, and that is the continuous projection of their emotional states onto the justifying figure of their child. Ben and Vivian might both be on the brinks of a breakdown as a result of continuously steering clear of marital confrontation, but it is their parental duty to readily ignore that fact and center all of their psychoanalytical concern on the behavioral pattern of their teenage daughter, whom all of their attempts at reconciliation continue to effect, a fact that neither of them have discussed until it is directed at them from the lips of the child herself. This depiction of the ongoing projection of responsibility taking place within the haunted household of the American family gives another nudge towards the theme of religion as it has previously been

seen to function as a convenient buffer between man and his mind in a country where the practice and preaching of tradition can come to mend even the biggest tragedies. In the scene that follows the full story of Larry's life is shown as a testimony to the criticism of how the desire driven, or rather as it is described by Vivian, switch flickering man is never able to take in the complete view of the bigger picture. Whilst Ben Harmon is unable to accept his failure as a nuclear family man, Larry, as it will be demonstrated below, is blindly searching to obtain a happy family that he had all along. (15:19-17:26) The first part of the scene takes place inside the walls of a crummy apartment in which Ben and Larry are sat in partial darkness facing each other. As Vivian recalled, Larry had stopped by Murder House expressing an interest in buying it, and now Ben wants to know the reason behind that interest. At this point in the plot there is enough baggage between the two men to fill up an entire condo complex, and the urge for answers is almost unbearable. Ben: "Right, the house is evil, now you wanna buy it." Larry: "That's goddamn right! I NEED that house! I NEED IT! That is the only place I have any hope to ever be happy again. With her!" The setting changes to a time before Ben Harmon and burn wounds, Larry is sat by his own family dinner table, not unlike Ben a few minutes before, about to leave it for good in favor of another woman: Lorraine (Larry's wife) is the one opening the fatal conversation: "I finally got the kids to bed". Larry: "sit down, Lorraine, we need to talk. There's really only one way to say this. I've fallen in love with somebody else. I didn't mean for it to happen." Lorraine: "Do I know her?" Larry: "Constance, from next door." Lorraine: "Well, she is very beautiful. I suppose if I were a man I would love her too. Are you going to leave us?" Larry: "Actually, I think that you should take the girls and go back to Ohio, and move in with your mother. And I will provide for you, always." Lorraine: "You're going to move her into my house?" Larry: "It was her house before. I can't live without her!" After this dialogue, Lorraine leaves the table, walks upstairs, and lights a match on herself and her sleeping daughters. The burn marks on Larry's face symbolize an almost poetic justice. When he left his wife for Constance Langdon in the early 1990's, she set fire to herself as well as her kids, taking herself and her offspring permanently away from a family about to be destroyed. However, all he wants is to be with Constance, a woman who did indeed never love him at all, but used his love for her in order to commit a murder that she herself was unable to execute and regain the possession of the house holding her darkest secret. The obtaining of ownership over Murder House is the same as the embodiment of the perfect family. No one can ever truly come to control it as there are powers, or rather urges, at play far greater than what the people involved are willing to recognize within and around themselves as it has now been continually established by the actions of Constance, Larry

and the ever so persistent union of Mr. and Mrs. Harmon. The reproductive symbolism of Murder House as it corresponds with the psychoanalytical imagery of the final Freudian mind model will forever remain the same. For while a house can be remodeled, it will still have the same basic building structure: A basement, a living area and a rooftop, just like the mind of the men and women who fill out its spaces.

Ep. 8: Rubber Man

This episode introduces the role of Vivian Harmon's character as the mediator who comes to demonstrate the extreme extent to which the nuclear family provides the perfect recipe for maintaining a sociological gender bias that should have died long ago, but has somehow managed to disguise itself as a psychological truth written in as solid stone as the ten commandments within the contextual framework of contemporary society. By looking at the manner of Vivian's hospitalization into a mental institution and the blatant parallel to its footing in reality drawn in the discourse of the scenes leading up to it, I wish to capture and elaborate on the turning point of the series critical narrative demonstrating the amount of control that resides in the social constructions of mental gender roles.

(0:31-2:58) The year is 2011, the timeframe is that of the pilot and the house has just welcomed its new owners. The setting is the darkened living room. Inside the space is filled with the Harmon's furniture ready to be arranged. Amongst them walks Nora Montgomery the ghost of Murder House's original owner, unaware of the time in which she is walking. As she moves around in confusion, she talks to someone in the room with her whom the camera has yet to reveal. Nora: "This is wrong. It's all wrong. Who are you? What did you do to my house, my belongings? I'm terribly confused. These things aren't mine. These furnishings, fabrics, cheap! Vulgar! They picked the flesh off my beautiful home and left... The skeleton, the bare bones." She is answered by Tate, another ghost living for all of eternity inside the threshold of the Harmon household. "How can I comfort you?" Nora: "My baby? Where is my baby?" Tate: "Is that what you want? A baby?" Nora: "Yes! I just want my baby." As the dialogue finishes the scene shifts to the outside trashcans, and shows Tate, the ghost of Constance Langdon's serial killer son, as he picks up the rubber suit that Ben had disposed of hours earlier as per Vivian's request. As he reenters the house, he walks to the Harmon's bedroom where Vivian awaits her husband with whom she has just surprisingly rekindled the physical aspect of their marital relationship. Now, the reality of the pilot is coming into action. The man that Vivian is with whilst her husband is downstairs in the kitchen in a cloud of his own

active repression is not her husband; in fact, he is not even a man. He is the ghost of a vengeful teenager out to please a mother figure that isn't his own. As he leaves the bedroom he crosses paths with Ben, who is entranced by the repressive power that rests inside the house. He does not see the leather clad figure that walks beside him on the stairs. As he enters his bedroom, his wife is in the bed, eyes wide open. She knows that something is wrong, but does not immediately react to it. Denial is cemented with a quick reassurance in the three worded structure that we all long to hear, "I love you" and the opening sequence comes to a close as we see Tate standing in the bathroom removing the leather mask from his head and staring into the face of his own reflection. It is at this time that Ryan Murphy starts to connect the dots of his critical recreation of the American society aimed at exposing the unhealthy relationship between the societal construction of outdated assignment of gender roles, family life and reproductive practice and the continuous dismissal of the psychological nature of the American people expected to perform that very practice. The following scenes will all come to dramatically underline that very unhealthy relationship as it is vividly criticized by the medium of mental health as it is openly addressed whilst functioning to have the pregnant Vivian moved securely behind closed doors of psychiatric ward.

The perception that a woman can solely be completed by having a baby is one that manages to travel through time and continue to impact the woman of the present day. As the scene above came to demonstrate the ghost of Nora Montgomery who made Murder House her final resting place in the 1920's, and her want for a baby, is what leads to Vivian's supernatural rape, and that rape, is what will lead her to be placed in the stereotype of the unstable woman in need of others to take care of her as she is unable to do so herself. Nora has previously shown herself to Vivian and as the truth becomes clearer to her, the prejudice of those around her becomes stronger. (3:53-4:59)

Vivian: "I'm not crazy, she was here! She was here looking at everything going on about butterfly wings and the Tiffany glass as if she build the house herself." Marcy: "She must have had a granddaughter!" Vivian: "Marcy, you were on the same Murder House Tour I was on! He said, she killed herself and her only child was dead." Moira: "They do say we all have a doppelganger, Mrs. Harmon." Vivian: "It feels as if someone is trying to make me feel like I'm crazy!" Marcy: "Oh Lord, Moira, how about a calming cup of tea for Mrs. Harmon?" Vivian: "Don't patronize me, Marcy! In fact there is someone who wants my husband, who wants my life!" Marcy: "You know, Cousin Helen went paranoid when she was pregnant with her second! She imagined the stuffed animals in the nursery dancing to some dreadful African drumbeat. She thought they were enacting Voodoo on her. We got her hormones straightened out and she was right back on the happy track in

no time!” The doppelganger that Moira is referring to in the scene is the woman herself and the emotional connotations of her societally unchangeable gender role. That someone who makes Vivian feel as if she is unstable is something as untouchable and unaffected by time as a ghost: It is a silencing of the present coming from the gender biased caricature of the past and bringing with it a useful message for the contemporary woman who wants to be viewed outside of her biological context. If such a wanting can’t be repressed then it must be laid to rest, unless she wants to have it come back and haunt her. The supernatural symbolism of Nora Montgomery’s ghost represents a running critique of the past as it remains influentially evident in the present. If the women of today are expected to have the same desires as the women of the 1920’s they will never evolve from the restraint of their old norm. This symbolism is one that can also be readily applied in the greater scheme of the nuclear family as it is represented from within Murder House mansion. The ghost(s) represent the individual(s) of the American population, and the house represents the societal construct of the American dream trapping everyone inside the ideal of the traditional nuclear family. As for the developmental narrative detailing Vivian Harmon’s embodiment of the mental instability ascribed onto her as a result of her gender as well as by the current stage of her reproductive process, Murphy continues to account for the relationship between men and women as something that encompasses an undertone of immortal misogyny. In the following exchange between Ben and Violet Harmon there is a clear indication of blame and where it can be placed. The person to be held responsible for Vivian’s behavior is her husband. (20:14-20:41) Violet: “This isn’t about me. I’m saying that Mom is crazy, and it’s your fault. You drove her crazy! You’re a cheater! Young girls, old ladies with feather dusters? You’re so weird and pathetic, I’m surprised you haven’t gone after me!” Ben: “I’m still your father, do not talk to me that way.” Violet: “I don’t have any more to say anyway, session is over!” After all, it would be crazy to expect a woman to have any power with which to go against her own fragile nature, or at least, that is the perception that Vivian exemplifies within the next included scene as she sits by her kitchen table holding a teacup with one hand and wiping away tears from her cheek with the other. (22:06-24:01) Vivian: “And everyone thinks I’m crazy. I know Ben does, I know it. And I’ve been too embarrassed to call Luke.” Moira: “That’s what men do. They make you think you’re crazy so they can have their fun. Haven’t you read “The yellow wallpaper” by Charlotte Perkins Gilman?” Vivian: “No.” Moira: “Her husband, a doctor, locks her away in the upstairs bedroom to recuperate from a slight hysterical tendency. Staring at the yellow wallpaper day after day... She begins to hallucinate that there are women trapped in the pattern. Half mad, she scrapes off the wallpaper to set the women

free. When her husband finally unlocks the door, he finds her circling the room, touching the wallpaper, whispering “I finally got out of here”. Since the beginning of time, men find excuses to lock women away. They make up deceases, like hysteria. Do you know where that word comes from?” Vivian: “No.” Moira: “The Greek word for uterus. In the second Century they thought it was caused by sexual deprivation. And the only possible cure was hysterical paroxysm. Orgasms. Doctors would masturbate women in their office and call it medicine.” Vivian: “I had no idea.” Moira: “It was a hundred years ago, but we’re no better off today. Men are still inventing ways to drive women over the edge. Look at you and Mr. Harmon. Cheating on you, and leaving you here pregnant with twins alone to care for your truant teenage daughter. Any woman would lose her mind.” This notion of having a man placed at the helm of mending as well as determining the state of female mentality is given a cutting cultural commentary as the housemaid Moira calls upon the truth that reflects itself in Gilman’s fiction from 1892 in order to assure Vivian of the fact that she is not, in fact, crazy, but is rather finding herself to experience the kind of gender driven repression that she had perhaps discarded as mere history, being a modern woman of 2011. This inclusion of a direct literary reference on the matter perhaps perfectly mirrors Murphy’s own intentions for calling out the need of a contemporary adaptation to gender equality within the American nation. Furthermore, the scene also captures a thought that Freud himself took notice of. In the complete psychological works of Sigmund Freud containing ‘Pre-Psycho- Analytic Publications and Unpublished Drafts’ from 1966, the concept of hysteria is presented by Freud as something that can be seen to occur in prolongation of female sexuality. On the relationship between women and hysteria, he writes:

Furthermore, hysteria has been observed in women with a complete lack of genitalia, and every physician will have seen a number of cases of hysteria in women whose genitals exhibited no anatomical changes at all, just as, on the contrary, the majority of women with diseases of the sexual organs do not suffer from hysteria. It must, however, be admitted that conditions related *functionally* to sexual life play a great part in the aetiology of hysteria (as of all neuroses), and they do so on account of the high physical significance of this function especially in the female sex.- Trauma is a frequent incidental cause of hysterical illness, in two directions: first, by a hitherto unobserved hysterical disposition being aroused by a powerful physical trauma, which is accompanied by fright and a momentary loss of consciousness, and secondly, by the

part of the body affected by the trauma becoming the seat of a local hysteria. (Freud 51).

Not only is Vivian experiencing a repression that is as immortal as the ghost of Moira, she is also being made to conform to a (Freudian) textbook description of emotional trauma that attributes the majority of the responsibility onto the biological aspect of her gender reacting to the trauma of her rape, rather than the action of the rape itself, a manner of biased attribution that is patronizingly continued by her husband in the following sequence. (26:06-28:50) Vivian: "I swear to Christ, if you're about to diagnose me with Post Traumatic Shock Syndrome, I am gonna bash your Goddamn face in!" Ben: "Fine. Let's discuss the brain eating. Let's talk about the dangers of ingesting raw organs. Mad cow disease, Vivian. Have you ever heard of that?" Vivian: "If you don't believe me, go talk to your daughter! Violet was there too!" (...) Vivian: "You know what? You can't force us to stay in California! You can't! Cause I'm getting out of this house, I'm booking us tickets to Florida!" Ben: "I'll go to the courts if I have to. You're mentally unstable, Vivian! You're seeing things." Vivian: "I'm seeing things? You mean the way you were seeing... Your little 10 year old mistress?" Ben: "You're being stupid!" Vivian: "The only stupid thing that I did was not changing the alarm code after I kicked your ass outta here! Did you give it to her? As that how she has been getting in here?" Ben: "Vivian, you're coming unhinged!" Vivian: "You never stopped seeing her! You went to Boston to see her... And one of your patients attacked us, Jesus, Ben!" Ben: "What the hell are you saying?" Vivian: "Did you plan this whole thing with your little whore; did you plan to gaslight me?" Ben: "Oh my God!" Vivian: "To get rid of me so she could come in and take my place?" Ben: "This is crazy talk, Vivian!" As the episode nears its point of no return for Vivian there is a significant increase in Ben Harmon's interest in his wife's behavior. For all his infidelity and flaws he is still the one deemed capable of providing his wife with a much needed dose of reason both as a psychiatrist as well as her lawfully wedded spouse. Although Vivian's fears of being eliminated so that a younger model can take her place are not without truth to them, she is still, first and foremost, seen as a pregnant woman rapidly losing control of her mental health. Vivian herself is well aware of that definition and addresses it defensively right until it breaks her, as it can be seen in her exchange with the realtor who previously advocated the conveniently quick fix of a medicinal cocktail to stabilize her in her vulnerable state. (31:54-32:12) Vivian: "Excuse me, Marcy! I'm not crazy, I'm just pregnant!" This defense has previously been used by Hayden, and provides a parallel that continues to emphasize how a women, as well as men for that matter, are all traditionally defined by the pre-existing

expectations of gender. Yet, as it has been shown repeatedly in the family based narratives, there is a remarkable difference between the consequences of acting on your impulses as a man steered by the compass of sexual instincts powered by the id, and that of a woman having an emotional reaction to those same impulses. Hayden and Vivian ultimately become one and the same woman, mentally as well as physically, by way of their sexuality manifesting itself in active reproductive action. And for a pregnant woman there is no other mental state than an unstable one in need of regulation. The portrayal of an uneven power balance between the genders as it unfolds throughout the episode concludes with a direct parallel between the fate of the woman in ‘the yellow wallpaper’ and that of Vivian Harmon who is tragically unable to break her unraveling pattern as the following scene functions to describe. (35:23-36:12) Ben: “I’m a licensed psychiatrist, I know a psychotic break when I see one! My wife is a danger to herself and to others!” Luke: “So you wanna ship her off to the looney bin? So you get the house, the kids, the mistress, and the dog!” Ben: “Look, I don’t know who you think you are to my wife? But this is still my Goddamned house, and you need to get the hell out!” (...) (39:13-40:48) Vivian: “What’s going on?” Ben: “I had to do it, Vivian. You’re unstable!” Vivian: “No!” Ben: “And you need to be... Evaluated. These men are gonna take you to a hospital. I’m so sorry! But it’s the best alternative. I didn’t wanna do it! You shot me, sweetheart. It has gotten dangerous!” The ghosts in Murder House have driven Vivian Harmon to her breaking point and in an attempt to shoot the latex clad figure who forced himself upon her in the pilot, she has accidentally shot her husband. The shot is nowhere near fatal, but it rings in the end of her mental credibility. As she lays sedated in her bedroom, her husband is downstairs making the active decision to have her transferred into the care of professionals. While there will be no patterned wallpaper for her to pull at in the confines of the psychiatric hospital, she will be as locked up as Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s protagonist, proving Moira right in her view of misogyny as an ever present aspect of contemporary society.

Ep. 9: Spooky Little Girl

This section will tackle the pinnacle of conflict in the Harmon family’s marital narrative from which the entire (American Horror) story has its start, and function to show the ongoing thematic thread of a patriarchal double standard that lives under the skin of none other than the self-proclaimed family man Ben Harmon himself, as well as how the acknowledgement of his internal of gender bias towards his own wife allows him to finally see the reality of an undying repetition of a nuclear family dysfunction that has its permanent home on the Murder House address. At this

point in the analysis I intend to once again engage the accounts made both by Freud and Kristeva on the resurfacing qualities of the human response to the identity of the repressed abject as it shows how there is indeed a theoretical reality resting in Ryan Murphy's contemporary cautionary tale.

This episode opens with Ben Harmon as he is left behind inside Murder House accompanied solely by his daughter and his maid, who is busy making the bed whilst evoking a change in the inner mechanism of her male employer. (4:19-5:55) Moira: "It must be hard on you with your wife indisposed. I miss Vivian, we became quite close. Don't worry our secret is safe." Ben: "What secret?" Moira: "The way you look at me. The way you fantasize about me. You have a diseased mind doctor Harmon. That must be why you became a therapist." Ben: "I'm glad that you and my wife are friends, but I'm not interested in your pet theories about me." Moira: "So maybe I'm way off base, or maybe I'm crazy like Vivian. Is that what you think doctor?" Ben: "I think you must have pretty low self-esteem to keep throwing yourself at a married man who doesn't want you." Moira: "So you don't want me? You don't find me attractive?" Ben: "Just make Violet a sandwich please!" Moira: "I don't believe you, Ben! I know you want me." Ben: "No! I don't want this. I love my wife! I want her to get better and come home so I can take care of her. Just a normal, boring family." Moira: "That's a beautiful speech, Ben." Ben: "It's Doctor Harmon! No more games! No more bullshit, do you understand?" Moira: "I better make Violet a sandwich. You know, it's just a matter of time, Ben. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak." Moira is a figure that changes according to the eyes that view her. When she is engaging with Vivian, she takes on the form of a woman in her 60's which is the age that she would have been, had she not been shot by Constance in 1983. If she comes in contact with Ben, she appears to be in her early 30's, the age at which she was so tempting to a married man that it led to her murder. At this point it should be noted upon that the ghost of Moira is perhaps intended to symbolize the repressed impulse of a man who has been forcing himself to turn a blind eye to the nature of his sexual desire in an attempt to reestablish himself in the role of a self-proclaimed family man. As it is defined by Michael Kahn in his description of the mind as an equivalent to the structure of a house, there is a regulating function that takes place between the impulse and their recognition inside the realms of consciousness:

If an unacceptable impulse gets just past the threshold, the watchman will evict it and push it back into the entrance hall. The impulses that are turned back in this fashion are *repressed*. Once an impulse has gained admission to the drawing room, it is still not conscious until it has caught the eye of consciousness. Such impulses, those in the

drawing room but not yet seen by consciousness, are *preconscious*; this drawing room is the system of the preconscious. (18-19).

In her manifestation towards Ben, Moira provides a reflection on the convenient mechanism that is posed to the individual by the ability preconscious repression. Although Ben is aware of the impulses that Moira awakes in him, he is still unaware as to why in his state of relieving repression. The intention of Moira, as it will be shown further through the narrative of the episode, is for Ben to acknowledge the nature of his behavior, and not in the manner of admitting to sexual sidesteps as he has done before, but rather in terms of the gender bias that he has so frequently practiced towards the woman that he has declared his love for double the amount of times than he has actually listened to her. As it has been stated in previous sections of this analysis there seems to be a pre-existing understanding of men and women in place from the cultural standpoint of American society. Taking on the responsibility of his seemingly uncontrollable sexual drive stemming from a dominant id is not the sacrifice that needs to be made. A man being held accountable for infidelity is portrayed in this context as an action that brings little revelation to the uneven relationship between gender role and social practice. If Ben were to declare his deceitful behavior, he would be transferred into the psychologically constructed confines of the id driven characteristic of the male gender without much turmoil; in fact, he might even be able to stay there without having to actually adapt to the expectations of the people who surround him. While his wife often provided him with an ultimatum in order to change his ways, she never fully left him behind, at least not until he had her leave to be hospitalized. As for Vivian that same security was not provided by the curtesy her gender role. The more her pregnancy progressed, the less she was seen as someone able to practice proper self-care. Luckily for her, she married a psychiatrist with just enough bias in his outlook on women to have her discarded in a condescending yet caring tone. The unfolding of Ben Harmon's bias as it has been sitting right beneath the surface of his every move is not lessened as he learns of Vivian's (supernatural) rape. The symbolic function of the religious connotations to the female gender that has been frequently incorporated into Vivian's situation is established once and for all in this episode. Not only is it revealed that her fears were indeed more than a reaction to her changing hormones, the identity of what grows inside her is described by a medium with an amount of detail that foreshadows her coming demise. (39:11-40:00) Billie Dean (medium): "A child born of human and spirit will usher in the end of times! It is the essence of evil. A perversion of the immaculate conception." Constance: "What are you talking about?" Billie Dean: "Oh, come on, Honey. The Holy Ghost merely whispered in The Virgin Mary's ear and she begat the son of God! If the devil is

going to use a human womb for his spawn, he's gonna want a little more bang for his buck!" Not only has Vivian Harmon been subjected to the pain of sexual abuse she has involuntarily taken part in nothing less than a perversion of the very reproductive act that brought salvation to mankind. She is in desperate need of the hope that her husband has continued to project onto the survival of their family, unfortunately for her that hope is not immune to the sore hatred that comes from a bruised ego. Vivian has indeed told her husband of the rapist in the rubber suit and each time she has been silenced by the argument of a reason that she herself has been perceived to be without. That is until Doctor Ben Harmon receives a call from the doctor in charge of his wife's medical progress.

(13:41-14:20) Ben: "Hello? Just slow down Doctor, I can't understand you." Doctor: "I spoke with Vivian's psychiatrist and he doesn't feel she's mentally strong enough to hear this news right now. Normally I would be very uncomfortable giving a husband this information, but you are her designated healthcare proxy. Ben: "So just tell me what's going on, Doctor!" Doctor:

"Heteropaternal Superfecundation." Ben: "Hetero what?" Doctor: "Your wife's twins have different fathers. I'm sorry." Ben: "What did you say?" Doctor: "It's extremely rare, maybe one in a million.

Your wife must have had intercourse with two different men during the same ovulation cycle within a 48 hour period." Although he swore to keep faith in his family, the knowledge of his wife's extramarital conduct sends him into a state of unfiltered rage that truly functions to demonstrate the unlikely equal power balance of the ideal nuclear family union that Murphy has persistently portrayed with a critical side glance. The dialogue that takes place in the scene below between Ben and the nurse taking care of Vivian further confirms the prejudice that is portrayed to be projected onto the pregnant woman by everyone around her, especially those acting in the roles of caretakers both professional as well as emotional. (19:41-19:57) Nurse: "She has been extremely agitated and the paranoia hasn't abated. I'm sure the doctor will change up the meds when he gets here, but in the meantime, we've had to keep her restrained." Ben: "Restrained?" Nurse: "She attacked one of the orderly's. He suggested that this rapist in a rubber suit was some kind of sexual fantasy." This illustration might be intended to provide a symbolical commentary on the punishment that could be inflicted onto women who have shown a sexual pattern differing from that of the norm. Vivian is not merely pregnant, she is pregnant by two different men, so naturally she must have a tendency to favor the unconventional and obtain it by way of making up a rape-based fantasy for herself. A tendency that is diagnosed by yet another man functioning to take care of the woman as she is admitted for observation. However, there is not much help for Vivian to be had from the husband who wanted to keep her from hurting as Ben Harmon, a known cheater, has no empathy for a

supposed fellow cheater as the following scene thoroughly underlines. (20:18-21:30) Ben (to a heavily sedated Vivian restrained to a hospital bed): “I know you can’t carry on a conversation right now. It’s okay; I know what you’re thinking. You’re thinking: “Thank God he’s here! Thank God he can see what they’re doing to me and how wrong it is. Thank God he’s a shrink so he can get me out of here.” You’re right! You’re in hell here. This is no place for my wife. And I’d move heaven and earth for the Vivian I thought I was married to. But you aren’t her. You’re a stranger to me! You actually pretended, maybe even believed like a sociopath that you were some kind of holy saint without sin while you shit all over me, our life and our family with betrayal and lies. The way I feel right now, I wouldn’t lift a finger to help you get out of here. ” In the same manner as it was recalled by Violets companion in citing sections of the Bible in episode 6 there is still an element of holy hatred projected onto the woman by an angry creature that has been expelled from the heavenly idea of home due to its hurtful intensions, only, this time around the dragon with seven heads has transformed into a husband scorned. Where he is a man with the weak flesh that all men have, as according to Moira, Vivian is a sociopath worthy of nothing else than being exactly where she is, strapped to a metal bed in a tiny room. It is not until he is made to directly face the reality of his actions by the sterile man he thought to be the father of Vivian’s second child that Ben Harmon realizes how his wife might have actually been speaking the truth all along, rather than hallucinating traumatic sexual fantasies whilst in the grip of her own hormonal imbalance. (35:37-36:15) Luke: “I don’t know Vivian that well, but clearly she has been a very busy girl.” Ben: “Hey don’t talk about my wife like that, you don’t know her!” Luke: “And you do? You called her a whore and a liar that was just in the last 5 minutes! Your own wife, you locked her away, Ben. You know what? Maybe it’s good, maybe she’s safer there!” From that moment on, the portrayed perspective of bias shifts from being a constant companion to the interaction between the parental figures of the contemporary nuclear family and opens the door to an unveiling chain of events that will ultimately initiate the coming into action of the Harmon family’s happy ever afterlife. (36:44- 37:39) Ben: “You’re in this house all of the time, you see everything. What happened with Vivian?” Moira: “Why do you care? You’re a man, isn’t this what all men want? The freedom to satiate their needs guilt free?” Ben: “Just tell me the truth! I think I made a horrible mistake by putting Vivian in the hospital. She was attacked by someone!” Moira: “Congratulations, Doctor Harmon. (After this proclamation the young woman who walked past him a second prior turns towards him as a woman in her 60’s) You’re finally beginning to see things as they are!” As it is said by Moira, Ben’s ability to reach the family that he has raced towards from the beginning starts with him seeing beyond his

own prejudice both towards his wife suffering under her biological definition as an unstable woman weakened to the point of insanity by pregnancy as well as the psychologically prescribed freedom of his own position as a man held up by the force of his untamable sexual instinct.

Ep. 11: Birth

As I approach the last part of my psychoanalytical deconstruction of Freudian manifestations in contemporary family practice set in the supernatural framework of abject circumstances, I wish to conclude on the critical premise of demonstrating gender bias as it continues to reproduce itself behind the treasured threshold of the American nuclear family.

As the entire narrative of the series revolves back and forth between the strive for the ideal nuclear family of 2011 and the 1920's, Ryan Murphy makes a point of showing how there is no time travel needed in order to encounter the reproductive conflict of past and present within the second to last episode. All of the ghosts are eagerly awaiting the arrival of the Harmon twins, each with their own motives for finally getting a grip on the idea that led them inside the haunted house in the first place. Most notably is the same sex couple whose familial misfortune the viewer was introduced to in the previous context of Halloween. In taking on the role of parents they are determined to mend what is left of their relationship which has been weighed down with multifaceted incompatibility even before it ended in their joint murders, and find themselves to be placed in a permanent state of baby bliss. Only, as the transcription below will come to demonstrate, there is an unrelenting discrepancy to be located between their parental desire and the factor of parental capability. (10:31-12:56) Constance: "What you are planning to do is unnatural." Chad: "Deodorant is unnatural, but it's a public good. We'll make excellent parents." Constance: "Man shall not lie with man. It is an abomination!" Chad: "So is that hairdo, but I figure that is your business." Constance: "Why can't you people just content yourself with having pets? Why must you subject an innocent child to your perversions?" Chad: "There's nothing in the studies that indicates being raised by same sex couples has any ill effects on children, I assume the same applies to the formerly living." Constance: "Well the only study I know is the study of blood and pain. My children came out of my body and that is something that you will never be able to understand!" Chad: "Lady, just because you happen to be the hole they crawled out of doesn't mean a goddamn thing." Constance: "It means everything!" Chad: "Right. Sure, that's why I can't even walk through my own home without tripping over one of your dead offspring." Constance: "I loved my children!" Chad: "To death!" Constance: "They are a part of me. Just like that unborn child is a part of me! And I will not have you put your filthy

hands on my grandchild!” Chad: “Grandchild? Wait a minute, are you telling me that Norman Bates Jr. is the baby daddy? You gotta love this house!” Constance: “Listen to me, you can have the other one! The one fathered by Doctor Harmon, I mean he’s an attractive man. But not my grandbaby!” Chad: “A blonde and a brunette just like me and Pat. It’s perfect. No!” We definitely need both.” Constance: “God, you’re vile! You are not suited to raise children.” Chad: “Raise them? Oh honey, no, no, no! We’re gonna wait until they reach that perfect adorable age, around a year, a year and a half or so, and then we’re gonna smother them with hypoallergenic pillows. That way, they’ll be cute forever!” As Chad’s proclamations come to show there is an undeniable element of selfishness behind the couple’s reproductive aspirations. First of all, his confrontation with Constance not only unravels from a place of defensive justification, it also takes on the form of a provocative instance of more wanting more for the sake of having it. Having a child is not the mere goal for Chad, as it is proven by his decline of keeping the baby that is not in direct relation to the homophobic woman standing beside him, his goal is to have it all. Why settle for one baby, when you can have two? This depiction can perhaps be intended to provide yet another critique at how the act of having a family is often used primarily for the sake of fulfilling a dream that is miles away from actually functioning in the realm of reality. In truth Chad and Pat were troubled from more than one elementary nuclear family perspective, at least according to George Peter Murdoch’s model for proper modification of family practice. Economically they were challenged to the point of desperation whilst trying with all their might to leave behind the house they bought in order to make a home, and sexually their incompatibility became something so overwhelming that it stopped being a topic of discussion and morphed into the passive aggressive baseline for their entire social dynamic. The relationship was doomed long before the deaths of its participants, but now the opportunity of adding a purposeful dimension to it has brought in a new breath of life. Furthermore, their intention of killing the children at a desirable age speaks loudly of the fact that there is no real desire for parenthood present in between the couple, just like it has been the case for all of the other reproductive narratives. The reproductive desire that runs through the wires of Murder House is not one for the emotional task of having a child; it is for the function of the child as a mean for righteous reparation of an ideal family that will continually be re-broken beyond repair. As for the clash between the composition of the new and the norm, Constance Langdon’s unshakable objection to the prospect of her grandchild falling into the family structure of Chad and Pat gives a vivid example of the immortal relationship between religion and its validating effect on the social practice of many an American individual. Constance, as her dialogue frequently

expresses, is not concerned by the fact that the birth of her grandchild will initiate the coming of all evil to the face of the earth, she is, however, mortified by the thought of having it raised in the confines of a same sex family, an almost comical depiction of the traditional nuclear family and its logic. Humans have known of the devil at all times, there is nothing new, or perhaps more to the point, modern about the beginning of the end at the hands of pure evil. On the other hand, the unknown, or rather, unbiblical image of a nonconforming rainbow family is something to be feared with a vengeance. On the subject of fear, the episode has the telling of the horror story reach its final stage of reproductive abjectivity. As she gives birth to the two children on whom all eyes of the house are eerily centered, Vivian Harmon is torn apart from the inside out. While the child fathered by her husband is born with the lifespan of a second, the child that was forcibly made by Tate Langdon, the dead teenager known to Vivian as the rubber clad rapist haunting her every waking moment, is born with a unique beauty and strength. Not only does the supernaturally conceived child draw a parallel back to the Biblical comparison between the beautiful being of the devil as seen and remembered by Violet's companion in episode 6, it also functions to embody the fatal exchange of abjection as it comes into action in the Murder House basement where Vivian bleeds out in the aftermath of having birthed a child that was made from the immortal desire of Nora Montgomery to obtain what can't be had. As it is written in Sue Vice's 1996 collective work 'Psychoanalytic Criticism A Reader': "Just as Kristeva describes the process of abjection here- 'I expel myself'- so the child by casting 'himself out, founds his subjectivity by rehearsing his annihilation in a game that can only end in death'" (153). Childbirth in the context of abjection is exactly the promise of a coming destruction. The child, as written in Vice's work, is made aware of the self by engaging with the drive to destroy it. Vivian's supernatural offspring can therefore be said to symbolize a critical viewpoint that holds within it a message of acknowledgement meant to encourage the individual to envision the abject reality of one's destructive drive. Had Nora Montgomery not lost her own child, she would have never had the relentless need for becoming a parent, and she would never have had Tate procreate with the unknowing Vivian Harmon. While they have engaged with the subject of infidelity and mental instability on various occasions neither Ben nor Vivian Harmon has made much of an effort to evaluate the truthful success rate of their reignited reproductive process. Much like the child removing him or herself from the context of the mother in order to find an understanding for the features of his or her nature by way of the destruction that very removal will initiate, the reproductive American is perhaps encouraged by Murphy to take a step back from the nuclear family fast track and consider all aspects of his or her

personality prior to conception. As it has been visualized repeatedly both genders have bias directed towards them accounting for their weaknesses, and it is the destructive actualization of that very bias that sets the death of Vivian Harmon and her contemporary nuclear family in motion.

The coming together of the two births, symbolizes the never changing pattern of parenthood. While the circumstances in Murder House are unbelievable, supernatural even, a fact that has now become visible to Ben Harmon's previously so blinded eyes, the roles of Ben and Vivian fall perfectly into place. She is the wife in labor, he is the husband sitting by her side, her hand firmly placed in his, urging her to breathe. (27:55-36:57) Ben: "Vivian, listen to me. Concentrate on my words. We can be happy, honey! Just like we were before. Before my mistakes, before this house! Hold on, Vivian! Stay with me! Don't die; don't die on me, Vivian! We can still have a life together! We can still be happy..." The thematic juxtapositions of life and death, family and the mind structures of the individuals that make them, all come together to support the overall message. The roles of the nuclear family participants will never change, and if they do, it will cause a chain reaction of pain that will function to put the straying individual right back into place. No amount of cheating and dramatic claims to never reconcile will keep Ben and Vivian from performing the proper practice that reproduction requires at the moment of birth. As Vivian is hastily bleeding out from birthing the Anti-Christ, Ben is still holding on to her hand as well as to the hope of nuclear family happiness that started the car with the course for California in the first place.

Ep. 12: Afterbirth

As a concluding instance, I will be looking at the final Freudian aspects of character development(s) in relation to the abject resolutions to the thematic conflict(s) between the culturally implemented gender bias in the form of religion, and the utilization of reproduction as a mean for getting a hold on that bright and shiny nuclear family norm that has continually been perceived to possess enough power to banish all the evil that came before it and make way for the individual to finally feel the success of the American dream.

The setting is that of nine months prior to the events of the previous episode. The viewer is transferred back to the beginning of the Harmon family's reproductive narrative as it unfolds to the backdrop of the abjectivity of Vivian's involuntary abortion and the instinctual diversion from its presence in the shape of Ben's affair. She is ready to leave the ruin of their marriage behind her and start anew in a different place, he is ready to pick up his toolset and build it back together. (0:10-

2:51) Vivian: "I'm gonna go. I'm taking Violet and going to Jo's." Ben: "Florida?" Vivian: "I wanna get there before the school year starts." Ben: "I don't understand? What about Los Angeles, I thought we agreed about the fresh start!" Vivian: "I just can't! We really tried." Ben: "We haven't tried!" Vivian: "I can't do it anymore!" Ben: "Therapy isn't trying it's just figuring stuff out so you can really do something." Vivian: "I've tried! And as much as I keep trying to let you in again, this wall comes up. And I, I can't, I can't get past it!" Ben: "Just look at this house. Look at this house I found, it's right near Hancock Park where all those big mansions from the 20's are, you always talked about how much you wanted a house like this, one with personality. Well here it is!" Vivian: "You don't listen. A house isn't gonna fix it, Ben." Ben: "It's just a house, Viv. Come on, take a look! It's nice, right? Tiffany lamps and everything, I dunno maybe it's haunted or something, I mean, it's still a stretch at that price, but it has been on the market for a while so maybe they'll go lower. There's even an office so I can see patients at home, I mean it's perfect!" Vivian: "No!" Ben: "Honey, the reason you can't hold on to this idea of leaving is because it's not what you want. I've been looking at houses for a month and when I found this one, I swear to God it was like a laser beam shot right into my brain, I could see it all so clearly! It was like a movie in my mind. We were together. You, me and Violet all around the fire. Violet was reading some depressing Russian novel and I was stoking the fire and you were on the couch rocking a baby. Honey, we have made so many life choices based on our gut and right now, my gut is telling me that this place, this house is gonna, it's gonna break down that wall inside you." Vivian: "I'm sure it's a beautiful house." Ben: "I love you so much. I'm begging you just come see the house, the three of us will fly out, just come see it. When I look at this place, for the first time I feel... Like there's hope!"

What Murphy might be insinuating with the concluding rewind to what drove the Harmon's from their rational decision to part ways is the fact that going with your gut (an action that Ben credits as the compass that has led them towards making their successful decisions) is not the answer to mending emotional problematics. If human intuition was the key to proper behavior there would be no problematics in the first place. That very saying might actually just be a justification that people make whilst steered by the drive of their pleasure principle in order to justify acting on it. Both Ben and Vivian have chased the (American) dream of happiness, however, one with more optimism than the other. The division between the actions of Ben and Vivian's narratives might actually have functioned to provide an insight not only into the everlasting presence of gender bias within American society, it could also have come to demonstrate how a society based on the ideal of an unobtainable model of social conduct values the blindness of the dreamer over the vision of the

realist. In the case of the Harmon family both perspectives are represented to severely different outcomes. Ben is the dreamer seeing things that aren't there (such as the idyllic possibility of his reunited family sitting by the fire), Vivian is the realist seeing things for what they are (like the ghosts walking bewilderedly around their living room) While he remains unharmed and in charge of the house that he guards through the blinding haze of his own desires, she ends hospitalized and alone as she is not adapting to the selective outlook on the traditional figure of the American dream that enhances the favorable and represses the horrifying, exactly like her husband. In spite of his devotion to the solution provided by the prospects of a new life, Ben Harmon sees little promise in the role of being a single father. Having lost his wife during childbirth and his teenage daughter to an accidental suicide by overdose, he can detect no other course of action than to follow them. Standing in the same office in which his dream of domestic bliss came to a halt with the news of his pregnant mistress, he neatly collects his contact information as he prepares to eat a bullet and end the continuation of his failed family once and for all, exactly Like Nora Montgomery did it nearly 100 years earlier. Only, he doesn't get farther than to touch the gun to his mouth before the ghost of Vivian takes it from him and delivers the same speech of hope and happiness that he gave to her so enthusiastically 9 months prior. (11:21-12:40) Ben: "Let me do it, then we can be together!" Vivian: "No, that baby needs a father, Ben!" Ben: "I'm not his father, you know it and I know it." Vivian: "He's my baby, and you shouldn't be smoking. I don't really care where he came from. I would give anything if I could take care of him." Ben: "Vivian, I am so sorry for everything I put you through!" Vivian: "I want you to hear me! I forgive you! So enough with the drama and the tragedy, we've had enough in this family! We had enough. And the one spot of light that there is, is that baby asleep upstairs. That's your opportunity to do something different. I want you to take that baby and I want you to leave this house and I want you to never come back!" The symbolism of the new start that a baby brings forth with its entrance into a world of pain and problematics is uttered by Vivian at full capacity. Ben might have lost everything, but he did indeed get a hold of the reset button that he spent almost a year trying to press. He is forgiven; he has the baby that he envisioned being held at the forefront of his reunited family and he has the freedom to break the pattern of his instinctually dictated morally deviant behavior and leave it in the past, or at least so it seems. (14:57) As Ben Harmon is hanged from the ceiling by the other occupants of the house the nuclear family comes full circle. What is interesting in the case of Ben Harmon is the symbolic reverse effect that the act of leaving his family has. Taking the newborn baby and getting out of harm's way is by far the best alternative, one that is even strongly encouraged by the wife he had hurt so frequently by leaving

for another woman, but much in line with his forgone behavioral pattern, his 'id' as it is both remembered as well as represented by the ghosts of the house comes to have the last of him.

As if there wasn't enough of an indication of the never ending narrative of the nuclear family, it doesn't take long before a new family comes knocking at the massive mansion door. (16:22-17:17) Marcy: "In the interest of full disclosure I must inform you that the previous owners passed away in the house. (...) The wife died during childbirth and the husband in his grief committed suicide. He hung himself from the second story balcony. It's a tragically romantic love story." Miguel: "Well, at least they weren't murdered!" (...) Marcy: "Mrs. Ramos!" Stacy: "Yes?" Marcy: "I'd be happy to show you another house! But no matter where you go, you'll be moving into somebody's history. Only this one can be had for 200.000 dollars less than the last time I sold it." (18:58-19:04) "SOLD" As the new couple moves in their furniture the same behavioral pattern starts to show itself between the married couple who finds themselves in need of a revival. (24:48-26:08) Miguel: "Gabe is graduating this year, this house is so big. Do you think we'll be lonely?" Stacy: "A baby? Don't you think I'm too old?" Miguel: "Almost! Almost, so we should get going!" Vivian: "I lost two babies in this house. One of them never even took a breath. And Constance stole the other one." Ben: "Well, at least he is out of this house." Vivian: "They seem like such a nice couple. They can't have a baby in this house!" Ben: "You're right! We have to do something." Moira: "You're going to need help! Some spirits in the house are angry and vengeful and eager to inflict their fate on others. But many of us are innocent, kind, blameless victims of the hands of another! And we don't wanna see more suffering in this house!" If the Murder House figure is a metaphor for the framework of American society as well as the reproductive expectations that are put onto the members of the American nuclear family the scene above provides an aspiring image of the possibility of normative adaptation to a contemporary voice of reason with its base in self-reflection. The new owners might be just as engaged in the idea of having a child as a method for keeping their family alive, but the ghosts that symbolize the American people have gained the critical knowledge of the dangers behind that manner reproductive repetition as a mean for social-preservation to terminate that development before it terminates them. As they scare the owners to the point fleeing without their belongings in the middle of the night and never to return the repetitive cycle of family failure is broken. As the ghosts break the haunting habit that has led them all to the same final resting place, another development comes into action. From the basement echoes the sound of a crying infant and as Vivian follows the sound she learns that it is a cry coming from her very own baby. (39:39-42:51) Nora: "Oh, it's you, the birth mother. Perhaps it was

your poor nutrition or just your genetic inferiority; in any case I'm quite dissatisfied, he's a weakling!" Vivian: "His lungs are strong I could hear him upstairs. May I?" Nora: "Oh, hands off! People! You think you can just... Show up and claim some sort of birthright, but arrangements were made! This baby is mine." Vivian: "I understand! But I do know some, some tricks that might be helpful to quiet him down. What do you call him?" Nora: "Little Noisy Monster. (...) Oh, thank God! I was actually afraid I might harm him if he didn't quiet down. He has been inconsolable for days and days, I am so exhausted! Oh dear, I think I might need to ... Take a rest. Perhaps you could keep him for the night?" Vivian: "You take a rest Mrs. Montgomery, just need a nice rest! We'll be fine." Nora: "I'm not entirely sure I have the patience to be a mother. Probably all of those hideous nannies! Mother wasn't very good at it, either, truth be told!" (...) (43:06-43:42) Vivian: "Look who I found! He was in the basement. He was down there with Nora, wouldn't stop crying!" Moira: "I knew she couldn't handle him. She doesn't really want a baby, she just got stuck on that idea! Not a motherly bone in her body that one!" With these two scenes Ryan Murphy manages to tie it all together as he ends the season by disclosing how all of the horror and untimely demise of each familial relationship came to be from a traditional want for motherhood existing in woman who was unable to parent all along. The discrepancy between the expectations of American society for the reproductive conduct of the American individual, who is by the definitions of psychology nothing more than a mere mortal human being, is given one last critical depiction. The final scene of the series shows Constance Langdon as she is sitting happily in a chair at her hairdresser's. At home the supernatural baby that outlived both its sibling as well as its mother is being watched by a nanny. As all members of the Harmon family have long since been buried and she is the sole caretaker of her devilish grandchild whose being is balancing on the border between meek child and murderous creature. In having yet another child come across her doorstep she is given another chance at the same salvation that her neighbors in Murder House so desperately wanted to achieve. As her hairdresser finishes retouching her roots she can no longer keep the joy of her parental rebirth to herself. (48:02-50:00) Constance: "May I confide something? Ever since I was a little girl, I knew I was destined for great things. I was gonna be somebody. A person of... Significance. A star of the silver screen I once thought. But, my dreams became nightmares. Instead of laurels... Funeral wreath's. Instead of glory... Bitter disappointment. Cruel afflictions. But now I understand! Tragedy was preparing me... For something greater! Every loss that came before was a lesson. I was being prepared! Now I know for what. This child. A remarkable boy, destined for greatness! In need of a remarkable mother! Someone forged in the fires of adversity. Who can guide him with

wisdom. With firmness. With love!” Constance Langdon contradicts the happy development above in order to show that there will always be a double standing running beneath the surface of the American dream as manifested in the sphere of family life, pointing out once and for all how the redeeming qualities associated with the obtainment of the nuclear family structure is ultimately what prevents it from successfully happening. By showing this repetition, Ryan Murphy is forwarding a message that should resonate with a good deal of its audience. If society does not move along on an ideological level, it will forever be frozen in time, exactly like the lost souls wondering around in the basement of Murder House. As we keep ourselves in check as acceptable societal participants by performing in accordance with an outdated set of societal constructions of normativity we will always be right at the boiling point of a conflict between what we are expected to be and what we are by way of our nature.

Conclusion

In order to give a well-rounded outline of my analytical findings, I wish to divide the following concluding segment into two complementary parts. Firstly, I will state the discoveries that have been uncovered in the making of the analysis as a final answer to the academic inquiry of how gender bias is continually implemented by the force of the American nuclear family with which I set out to deconstruct the cinematic construction of Ryan Murphy’s Murder House. Secondly, I intend to have my inquiry broaden itself to further reflect on the figure of the American society which has been under critical scrutiny as I proceed to build on the questioning tone with which I have sought to comprehend the problematic practice of proper social conduct that is presented to the American individual in the course of the analysis. It is my intention to ultimately underline how Ryan Murphy’s timeless narrative on the desire driven creature of the American nation remains a reoccurring theme both in reality as well as in its fictional recreation.

The analysis section provided an in depth deconstruction of the couples from whose actions the viewers were invited into the life of Murder House from which each story of fear and family was ultimately told. Throughout the scenes of the included relational narratives the viewer was introduced to the components of the American nuclear family in the wake of total destruction. Much in line with George Peter Murdoch’s forwarded formula, each family living in Murder House had the ideal nuclear participants of two parents and their child; only, they were all a far cry from the economic stability and sexual cohabitation that the historic composition called upon, an approach that might have been a defining choice made by the creator of the narrative from the get go. The

members of the Harmon family would undoubtedly be happier apart, but such a separation would go against the imagery of what a family is supposed to be. Therefore, it needed to be fixed by the magic of reproduction, and fast. As it was ultimately illustrated in the analytical paragraphs detailing the progression of each family desperately trying to uphold the performative pattern of the nuclear family, societal constructions, such as George Peter Murdoch's nuclear family as well as the societal foundation of an overtly religious undertone, will seemingly continue to have a firm hold on how Americans proceed to validate the authenticity of what constitutes a proper family as well as placing the ideal of that very family as the superior element of motivation from which the individual is expected to establish his or her sense of self, no matter how much bias that self is expected to perform or endure. By viewing Ryan Murphy's *American Horror Story: Murder House* as a critical depiction of the traditional value system of American society, I have come to discover a collection of correlating themes that all function to shed light on the most treasured and celebrated discrepancy in all of the United States: The discrepancy between ideal and individual. Freudian theory has allowed me to grasp at the blueprint of the individual mind and matter and has functioned to shed light on the mental factors in place behind Murphy's fictional portrayal of marital disruption. Not only has this granted me validation of my analytical claims based in reality, it has also made it a possibility to access the possible meaning meant to be left behind in the mind of the viewer. As it is described in the problem statement, the overall intention with this thesis was to acquire an answer to what constitutes the presence of gender bias in contemporary society by looking at the traditional construction of the American family. The institution of marriage is shown throughout the series to be placed as the highest ranking social practice to be embraced by the American individual as the framework for establishing a family, despite its total incompatibility with the internal construction of the human mind and moral, and its discriminating distribution of power and right to sexual freedom in between the genders. Just as well Ryan Murphy portrays the reproductive process as a method for survival that is as biological as the drive of desire, yet is unjustly given the symbolical connotation of a divine unifier between man and meaning. In the cases of the Harmon family, the original Montgomery family, Constance Langdon, and even Ben Harmon's young mistress, the creation of a new being is the solution to any and all problems, no matter how unrealistic that very idea is. A child, as it has been so frequently argued in the paragraphs of the analysis, is the ultimate reset button in the scheme of proper nuclear family conduct, and it can be pressed at any given moment.

As I have briefly commented on in the transitional section above that dealt with the thoughts and inspirations for the series as told by Ryan Murphy himself, there is something to be said for his blatant mediation of a repressive bias between the genders as it takes place in the idyllic setting of a loving contemporary marriage. While Ben Harmon is made to represent a man who is determined to salvage the wreckage of his family, he is also a reminder of the darkness that followed with the patriarchy of marriages past, in which a man was entitled to act on his sexual urges and return safely to the arms of his wife once his needs had been met, a fact that Vivian openly comments on in the series forth episode as she is able to see the glimmer that that unspoken (and outdated) freedom leaves behind in her husband's eyes. By the end of his life, Ben Harmon is able to see the true strength inhabited by the wife that he previously discarded with disgust as a pregnant psychopath incapable of controlling the nature of her actions, and recognize that strength as something that he himself does not possess. The very recognition of that fact is what leads him to break with the roles of the nuclear norm and obtain the ideal of complete and unbiased bliss. With the representation of the American family as a collective clash between a culture greatly capable of change (as shown in the character development of Ben Harmon) and its own never changing traditions embedded deeply in the social practice of the individual, *American Horror Story: Murder House* functions to send out a hard hitting critique of the repressive repetition of normative tradition as it hovers over the marital bedside of the American people implementing a highly selective approach to self-recognition that is as constant as the reproductive repetition unfolding behind the decadent exterior of the Murder House mansion.

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